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Religions and Development Research Programme

Whither Morality? ‘Finding God’ in the Fight against Corruption

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Working Paper 41 - 2010



Religions and Development

Research Programme

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is an international research partnership that is exploring the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction. The programme is comprised of a series of comparative research projects that are addressing the following questions:

- How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?
- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research aims to provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals. We believe that our role as researchers is not to make judgements about the truth or desirability of particular values or beliefs, nor is it to urge a greater or lesser role for religion in achieving development objectives. Instead, our aim is to produce systematic and reliable knowledge and better understanding of the social world.

The research focuses on four countries (India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania), enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems. The research projects will compare two or more of the focus countries, regions within the countries, different religious traditions and selected development activities and policies.

The consortium consists of six research partner organisations, each of which is working with other researchers in the four focus countries:

- University of Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, Department of Theology and Religion, Centre for West African Studies, Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.
- University of Bath, UK: Centre for Development Studies.
- Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi.
- Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.
- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan.

In addition to the research partners, links have been forged with non-academic and non-government bodies, including Islamic Relief.

Religions and Development

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Summary

There are growing calls for religion to be used in the fight against corruption, based on the assumption that religious people are more concerned with ethics than the non-religious, despite the fact that many of the most corrupt countries in the world also rank highly in terms of religiosity. This paper explores how the new 'myth' about the relationship between religion and corruption is based on assumptions not borne out through the evidence. The paper then examines whether a discursive relationship exists instead, and what the significance of such a relationship might be.

Based on a review of several studies of the statistical relationships between religion and corruption, the paper concludes that the evidence for a causal relationship between religion (or type of religion) and either higher or lower levels of corruption is in no way convincing. The methodologies that have been employed thus far are insufficient for proving – one way or another – a causal relationship. This literature is largely quantitative, with a dearth of empirical, fieldwork-based evidence. The results are often contradictory, depending upon which dataset has been used, which raises important methodological issues. The literature is tentative at best, offering comparisons between various datasets and pointing towards possible explanations, sometimes rooted in theory, sometimes not. The data used are often flawed, making the explanations that are advanced problematic. The data are aggregated at the country level; they do not reveal intra-country variations and cannot tell us anything about how individuals' attitudes towards corruption are formed, the impact of religious (and other socio-cultural influences) on attitude formation, or the ways that individuals condemn or justify corrupt behaviour using the language of religion.

The paper adds to a growing body of literature that questions whether research is likely to be able to prove a direct causal relationship between religion and corruption – either positive or negative – and certainly not with the methodologies employed so far. It advocates instead pluralistic approaches that privilege qualitative methodologies involving country and individual level empirical research. These would see both corruption and religion as lived experiences, through which morality is constructed and evolves. Such research, it is argued, would enable morality to be (re)injected into the *discourse* on corruption. Care needs to be taken in doing so: while religious leaders often urge their followers to desist from corrupt behaviour, some religious leaders and organizations are allegedly corrupt, and the common distinction between public and private morality that informs Western discourse may not apply (or may apply in different ways) to attitudes and behaviour in developing countries. Nevertheless, in many parts of the world, religion maintains a stronger hold on people's values, attitudes and behaviour

than democratic institutions, and as such, it remains an important potential source of power. Therefore, although care needs to be taken in engaging religious teachings and actors in anti-corruption discourses and initiatives, this paper argues that doing so may help to shape both academic and policy debates in a more engaging and significant way than the research available to date.

1 Introduction

In 2006, in a speech given at the London School of Economics, Transparency International's Chief Executive, David Nussbaum, argued for a new approach to combating corruption that takes into account the role that personal values play in moral decision-making related to corrupt practice. He explained:

In the case of values-based decisions like whether or not to bribe or accept a bribe, values and ethics can form a sort of threshold, establish under what emotional and external circumstances – if any – you may say yes. Your social environment, the level of trust you have in those around you, how you see this affecting people you care about, will also come into play; but your values will be a fundamental guide in making these decisions (Nussbaum, 2006, p.13).

He went on to make a direct link between values, religion and corruption. Religion provides a language of ethics and, often, an actual 'list of rules' to live by. Thus, it is argued that in countries where religion plays a vital role in the lives of most people, many, including public servants, are likely to derive their ethical framework in part from their religion. There are growing calls for religion to be used in the fight against corruption, through drawing on religious values and organizations. In Zamfara State, Nigeria, for instance, there have been several attempts to integrate local *Imams* (Islamic religious leaders) into the civil service, with the ultimate aim of reducing corruption and promoting higher ethical standards within it. In Zambia, Nevers Mumba, pastor, TV evangelist and Vice-President from 2003 to 2004, is reported to have "challenged the Church to assist Government fight corruption... the Church [has] a mandatory obligation to assist Government in resolving such pressing issues" (*Times of Zambia*, 2003). Similarly, the Ugandan government is reported to have asked the church to help in the fight against corruption. President Museveni, in a message delivered on his behalf by the Second Deputy Premier and Minister for Public Service Henry Kajura to pilgrims who turned up to celebrate the Uganda Martyrs' Day, called on the Church to help end corruption: "the Government alone cannot fight corruption to its end but the Church has a better platform to do that" (Allafrica.com, 2006).

The basis for the increasing attention given to the religion-corruption nexus stems from the argument that fairness and honesty form the basis of many religions, and as such, religious leaders can be utilized in the fight against corruption (Luxmoore, 1999). According to Beets, two apparent assumptions underlie the call for religious leaders and groups to support the fight against corruption. The first is that "faithful adherents to religion will refrain from corruption because of the inherent theft, dishonesty, illegality, and mistreatment of others [it implies]. The second, related assumption is that

those who are not faithful adherents of religions are more likely to engage in corruption because of an absence of religious guidance” (Beets, 2007, p.72). However, contrary to these assumptions, many of the most corrupt countries in the world (according to Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index [TI-CPI]’¹) also rank high in terms of religiosity (using indicators such as those used in the Pew Global Attitudes Project).

As this paper will show, the evidence for a causal relationship between religion (or type of religion) and either higher or lower levels of corruption is in no way convincing. The methodologies that have been employed thus far are insufficient for proving – one way or another – a causal relationship. This literature is largely quantitative, with a dearth of empirical, fieldwork-based evidence. The results are often contradictory, depending upon the dataset that has been used, which raises important methodological issues. The literature is tentative at best, offering comparisons between various datasets and pointing towards possible explanations, sometimes rooted in theory, sometimes not. The data used are often flawed, making the explanations that are advanced problematic. They are aggregated at the country level and cannot tell us anything about how individuals’ attitudes towards corruption are formed, the impact of religious (and other socio-cultural influences) on attitude formation, or the way that individuals condemn or justify corrupt behaviour using the language of religion.

This paper adds to a growing body of literature questioning the relevance of instrumentalist arguments that seek causal relationships between complex social phenomena and corruption. This literature looks, for example, at politics (Marquette, 2003; Polzer, 2001); gender (Alolo Al-hassan, 2007; Goetz, 2007); and social capital (Callahan, 2005; Graeff, 2009; Warren, 2001, 2004). What the analyses have in common is that they explore the ways in which instrumentalist approaches tend to both lack empirical evidence (and, usually, a sound theoretical basis) and also run the risk of distorting, intentionally or otherwise, other important aspects of the social phenomena under question. Marquette argues, for example, that the focus on democratic politics as a means of fighting corruption risks “devalu[ing] democracy in its own right” (2004, p.425). Goetz explains that “[l]ike any instrumentalist argument, the ‘women are less corrupt than men’ justification for bringing women into politics and public institutions is not just vulnerable to exposure as a myth; it puts women’s engagement in the public arena on the wrong foot” (2007, p.88). The current focus on religion has the same risks and could lead to similar (unintended) consequences.

The irony is, of course, that at least three decades of corruption studies have by and large argued specifically for a more 'rational' approach to the study of corruption, steering clear of areas such as morality, culture and religion. This paper first explores how religion and morality have been kept out of the debate on corruption and ethics in the public sector in recent years, while rationality and secularism have been seen as essential in building an institutionalist approach to corruption. It notes that we are now seeing a reversal of this. The paper then looks at the evidence in the current literature for a causal relationship between religion and corruption and questions the relevance of the methodologies being used to build up this evidence base. This section shows that the new 'myth' about the relationship between religion and corruption is based on assumptions that are not borne out by the evidence. The paper then goes on to explore whether or not it can be said that a discursive relationship exists between religion and corruption, if not a causal one, and what the significance of such a discursive relationship might be. Finally, the paper concludes by asking whether or not a (re)injection of public morality, if not religion, into discourses on governance, ethics and corruption might represent a useful way forward for academics and policy-makers.

2 Should morality and ethics be (re)injected into definitions of corruption?

The way in which corruption has been defined in recent years moved the discursive arena away from corruption as a problem of personal or social morality to one where the problem is instead a question of inadequate institutions. The most common definition of corruption in use today is “the abuse of public office for private gain” (World Bank, 1997, p.8). Ethics are loosely implied in this definition of corruption but are certainly not made explicit. Discourse analysis of the World Bank’s literature on corruption has revealed a process that established a particular definition that limits the study of corruption to public office holders and economics (Marquette, 2003; Polzer, 2001). This was done to meet the needs of a particular organization, but it has impacted the study of corruption as a whole. As Bukovansky points out, “Despite its moral overtones, the bulk of contemporary anti-corruption discourse deploys the language and methodologies of economics and rational choice to render diagnostic assessments of the plight of the corrupt and less developed” (2006, p.183). Indeed, in the donor-led discourse on corruption, there is no sense of the moral complexity surrounding decisions to act corruptly or not; certainly, morality has been stripped away from much of the contemporary debate about corruption, as it has been from this definition.

This has not always been the case. According to Wraith and Simpkins, “Corruption is above all a moral problem, immeasurable and imponderable” (Wraith and Simpkins, 1963, p.17). In his famous text, *The Moral Basis of a Backwards Society*, referring to Sicily, Banfield introduced the concept of the “amoral familist”, someone who works to “maximize the material short-run advantage of the nuclear family” (Banfield, 1958, p.85). Moral definitions of corruption have been accused of being Eurocentric, racist even, although critics have explained that, while morality may be relative according to context, ideas of ‘public duty’ are not (or should not be). However, as Philp so succinctly put it, “The relativism which we risk is not simply moral relativism; that might seem like a price worth paying to avoid western stipulation. But the danger of this move is that the damage to one’s analysis spreads beyond moral relativism to conceptual relativism” (Philp, 1997, p.442). This is why, decades into the contemporary study of corruption, we continue to be faced with dilemmas of definition. In an effort to strip the debate of any of its moral complexity, it has been rendered problematical at best, nonsensical at worst (see also Marquette, 2007).

We argue here that corruption can only be understood in terms of its multidimensionality. Legal or public sector definitions, such as the one provided by the World Bank, may not capture what society, generally speaking, believes to be corrupt, which itself may depend upon an individual's position vis-à-vis opportunities to engage in corruption. Indeed,

Before it became subject to the rigours of modern social science, corruption was used primarily as a term of moral condemnation. In moral terms, to corrupt means to pervert, degrade, ruin and debase...[however, with]... isolated exceptions, modern social science has largely eschewed the moral perspective on corruption (Williams, 1999, p.504).

Outside donor discourses, as we will see in this paper, discourses on corruption are often framed in moralistic terms, in which private and public morality overlap, but in ways that are not always compatible with other donor objectives.

3 Looking for evidence of a causal relationship between religion and corruption

Given the arguments advanced by analysts, leaders or organizations for an increased role for religion in the fight against corruption, it is vital to ask whether religious beliefs and values actually translate into less corruption. Do faithful religious adherents refrain from corrupt behaviour? Is the link between religious beliefs and values and corruption clear cut, in that the more faithful a person is to religious tenets abhorring dishonesty, illegality and so on, the less corrupt the person?

Perhaps surprisingly, despite the calls for renewed attention to values and ethics in the fight against religion, there is a meagre literature explicitly on the relationships between religion and corruption. Partly this is due to the continuing impact of secularism on political science and economics, two of the leading disciplinary approaches to the study of corruption.³ As with much of the general corruption literature, analyses tend to be economics-led, and generally lack theoretical explanation and historical or cultural context. Indeed, there seems to have been an intentional shying-away from more qualitative approaches, as evidenced by an opening caveat in a paper by Paldam (2001, p. 384):

The relations between economic development, culture, religion and corruption are surely complex, involving 'grand historical dynamics' far exceeding the possibilities of 'normal' empirical research. [In his view, it].. might be fool-hearted even to try such a pedestrian approach.

Instead, he argues that in his work "a piece of the grand pattern can be isolated and submitted to the standard 'hard' tools of analysis" (2001, p.384).

Moreover, studies find both negative and positive associations between greater religiosity and the prevalence of corruption, leading Beets, for example, (2007, p.72) to acknowledge that the influence of religion on corruption is not as clear as it is sometimes purported to be. The approach and findings of several of recent studies are summarized and critiqued below.

Paldam (2001) uses religion as a proxy for 'culture' in order to analyse the impact of culture on corruption (p.383), using his results to substantiate what he calls the 'Weber link'. His study uses eleven variables on religion from a cross-country dataset to demonstrate whether cultural factors, as formed by religious differences, can explain corruption in these countries. The study starts with an initial economic model of corruption that says that poor countries have higher levels of corruption, and as they go through economic transition to become rich, the levels of corruption drop dramatically.

Using longitudinal measures of corruption vis-à-vis the proportion of a country's population adhering to a particular religion, Paldam suggests that several religions have significant effects on the level of corruption and that religion could, incrementally, explain corruption, though some religions tend to decrease levels of corruption, while others tend to increase corruption levels. Paldam's results also reveal that extensive religious diversity within a country can reduce corruption levels.

His dataset includes religions that are 'statistically useable', in that they are both large enough and broadly distributed. This means, for example, that 'tribal' religions are amalgamated together, in order to become 'useable' data, regardless of whether or not they share worldviews or moral codes. He thus classifies religions in the following manner:

- A. Monotheistic religions originating in the Middle East (Judaism, Christianity and Islam)
- B. Polytheistic religions originating on the Indian subcontinent (Hinduism and Buddhism)
- C. Systems of belief originating in the Far East (Confucianism, Shintoism and Buddhism)
- D. Tribal religions and atheists (p.393).

Because Christianity is so widespread and so divided, in terms of denominations and sects, he then makes the following distinctions within Christianity (p.394):

- A. Pre-Reform Christians
 - a. Old Christians (Eastern and Orthodox)
 - b. Catholics
- B. Reform Christians
 - a. Protestants
 - b. Anglicans.

His results show that countries that are predominantly Christian are somewhat less corrupt than those that are predominantly non-Christian, and that countries that are Reform Christian are less corrupt than countries that are Pre-Reform Christian, taking into account level of development. Countries that are predominantly Muslim are found to be similarly corrupt to countries that are Pre-Reform Christian, although the exclusion of Muslim oil countries from the Gulf region makes any conclusions here difficult to support. Countries that have predominantly tribal religions (and atheists) are less corrupt

than others and, indeed, there seems to be a sharp increase in corruption following the change from tribal religion to another religion (generally speaking, Islam or Catholicism) (pp.402-408).⁴

Paldam suggests that his evidence demonstrates the validity of the 'Weber link'. As he explains,

One of the key purposes of the Reformation (almost 500 years ago) was precisely to fight the corruption (broadly defined) of the Catholic Church. Historians have pointed to other – more complex – reasons as well, but the moral stand against corruption was surely important. It is thus arguable that reverse causality entered into the Reformation process. It was the more 'moralist' countries [that] chose the various 'Reformist' denominations, while those more 'tolerant' remained with their old denominations...it is amazing that such a large gap in 'ethics' still remains (p.404).

Paldam's work, in many ways, demonstrates the worst excesses of empirical models used on their own to explain complex socio-cultural phenomena. His arbitrary classification system owes more to his worry about 'useable data' than to any understanding of the nature of various religions. Paldam does not provide a justification for putting practitioners of 'tribal religion' and atheists in the same category, other than, we assume, the fact that they are both 'residual'. There seems to be no other logical reason and this does not lend the findings credibility. We are also not at all convinced by the separation of Anglicans from other 'Reform Christians'. Paldam explains that the "[d]ata allows Anglicans to be separately analysed", presumably because the Anglican Church is widespread across many countries, particularly in the Commonwealth, but this seems, once again, to be rather poor logic. The same logic could of course easily apply to Islam, but there is no attempt by Paldam to disaggregate different Islamic sects.

Paldam's study, though it may be rigorous in its analysis of cross-country data, can be also be critiqued on the basis of its reliance on dated data. The study utilizes data from Barrett's 1982 study (Paldam, 2001, p.392). Paldam himself alludes to the fact that many countries used in his analysis have broken up since 1982. Also, the fact that Paldam used 16 main religious groups out of the more than 1,000 religions worldwide points to the need for caution when interpreting his findings. His statistical findings are often insignificant and, without any context or theoretical explanation, even those findings that are statistically significant are weak. In addition, he appears to merely 'throw in' a few heavyweight names (Weber, Rousseau, Hobbes), presumably to lend his findings credibility.

Beets (2007) provides another empirical examination of the link between religion and corruption, which builds on Paldam's work, using the following datasets: the TI-CPI (2003), *Britannica Book of the Year* (2003), *Religious Freedom in the World* (2000) and the *Pew Global Attitudes Project* (2002).

'Dominant' religions are compared, defined as those with an affiliation that exceeds fifty per cent of a nation's citizens. Countries are categorized as dominated by Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, other dominant, non-religious or no dominant religion. However, as noted with Paldam's work, using such a simplistic classification system is very problematic in the developing country context. Using this method, Beets classifies Ghana and Nigeria, for example, as Muslim countries, although there may only be a slight majority in both cases, according to his data (and this certainly could be contested by using other data sources). In both countries there are strong regional differences, with a largely Muslim north and a largely Christian south. The TI-CPI is a national level perceptions survey and does not differentiate between north and south in these countries, so there is no way to tell, using these data, if the predominantly Muslim part of Ghana, for example, is more or less corrupt than the predominantly Christian part of the country. The data also do not come to terms with the continuing influence of traditional religions and other cultural factors on Muslims and Christians in both countries, which makes it particularly difficult to make cross-national comparisons on the basis of adherence to the main world religions.

Beets compares countries across a range of factors, such as the dominant religion within each country, perceived corruption, the importance of religion to citizens and religious freedom, and concludes that when countries are grouped in accordance with their dominant religion, the groups differ significantly with regard to perceived corruption. When Beets compared countries using the TI-CPI, going from most to least corrupt, he found that the most corrupt countries were those with no dominant religion, followed by Muslim and Hindu majority countries, then Buddhist and Christian majority countries and, finally, Jewish majority countries. It should be noted, although Beets does not do so, that with only one country (Israel), the finding that Judaism is the least corrupt religion is hardly statistically significant and should be disregarded.

The study then goes on to look at levels of economic development, religious freedom and religiosity (i.e. the degree to which religion is important), and it is here that it becomes particularly interesting, representing a significant advance on Paldam. After compiling the data on all of the above, and comparing them with the findings on corruption, he concludes:

...when countries are grouped according to the religion that is dominant in each country, those religion groups differ significantly with regard to perceived corruption, the importance of religion to citizens, religious freedom, and GDP per capita. Predominantly Christian countries, for example, which comprise 48% of all countries included in the CPI, have a moderate level of perceived corruption, are moderate in their assessed importance of religion, have a relatively high degree of religious freedom, and have a relatively large GDP per capita. Predominantly Muslim countries, conversely, which comprise 26% of the countries included in the CPI, have a high level of perceived corruption, assess religion as very important, have relatively little religious freedom, and have a relatively small GDP per capita (Beets, 2007, p.80).

He is quick to argue that “care should be exercised” in interpreting these findings, acknowledging that they may have more to do with levels of wealth – which mean that there are fewer incentives to be corrupt and more money with which to fund anti-corruption strategies in richer countries - than the actual religion, and also that there are exceptions to the rule.

His most interesting finding seems to be that relating corruption to religiosity. As he explains, “since world religions consistently condemn theft and dishonesty, one might expect that, if citizens consider religion important, they would be less likely to engage in corruption. The results of this study, however, provide evidence to the contrary” (Beets, 2007, p.81). Other analysts note a similar negative relationship between religiosity and corruption. For example, Arruda (1997) contends that, despite increasing adherence, passion and dedication to the Roman Catholic faith, especially in Latin America, corruption continues to thrive, unchallenged by faith. He highlights a saying in Latin America which “shows the unethical culture prevailing in business within Spanish speaking countries: *el que no tranza no avanza* (one that does not act unethically does not succeed)” (Arruda, 1997, p.1598). This implies that if one desires to succeed in business, one must be prepared to act unethically regardless of one’s religious beliefs. Mitchell (2001) advances a similar argument with respect to the Philippines where, despite high levels of religiosity, the country is engulfed in entrenched corruption:

From Presidents to prostitutes, religion flows like a river through Philippine lives, offering a bizarre mix of old style faith and sometimes bloody violence... In the Philippines, it seems, religion is never far away. At Easter it bludgeons the imagination. Catholic worshippers in several towns re-enact the death of Christ by allowing themselves to be nailed to wooden crosses with stainless steel pikes. Other Filipinos descend in their millions on the nation's cathedrals and city squares to partake in a great upheaval of holy activity- preaching, praying, singing, dancing, kneeling and bowing (Mitchell, 2001, p.58).

Despite such high levels of religiosity, he notes, corruption is still rife (Mitchell 2001, p.59). Conversely, Beets (2007, p.72) argues that, although the Scandinavian countries are largely secular, with a declining influence of religion, corruption appears to be minimal, and these countries are among the least corrupt according to the TI-CPI.

Beets provides one possible explanation: in poorer countries, the few are perpetrators, while the many are victims, and these "victims may seek solace through their religion" (Beets, 2007, p. 81). There are, of course, other possible explanations. Some research suggests, for example, that religion in these countries may encourage qualities such as loyalty and a tendency towards acceptance of authority, both of which might undermine attempts to fight corruption. This, in turn, reflects wider cultural norms that place a high degree of value on hierarchy and structures, such as found in the family, schools, the work place and so on. Indeed, this has been reported to be the case in Italy, where loyalty and trustworthiness have been called "the virtues...of the corrupt" (Warren, 2004, p.10; Della Porta and Vannucci, 1999). La Porta et al (1997, p.337) report that the loyalty (and subsequent lack of trust in 'outsiders') that is characteristic of hierarchical organized religions, defined in their work as Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Muslim, strongly correlates to "less efficient judiciaries, greater corruption, lower-quality bureaucracies, higher rates of tax evasion, lower rates of participation in civic activities and professional associations, a lower level of importance of large firms of the economy, inferior infrastructures, and higher inflation".

Hierarchy is also seen as key in a study by Lambsdorff (2002), who does not use the TI-CPI (despite being its author) but instead employs a similar business survey across seventy-four countries, conducted by the World Bank and University of Basel, to explore whether and how investors' confidence facilitates corruption. In so doing, he found that certain religions, especially those less embedded in hierarchical structures, are able to counter corruption more easily than those with more

hierarchical structures. This, he argues, is due to those religions being far more amenable to the establishment of legal and procedural institutions. Lambsdorff concludes that, though religion may be effective in setting up ethical guidelines, certain “intrinsic obstacles may motivate potential actors to reject a corrupt transaction because they may also value its moral costs. But, compared to Protestantism, other religions are more hierarchical... This is commonly considered to be the crucial reason that societies with large shares of Protestants exhibit lower levels of corruption” (Lambsdorff, 2002, p. 842). For instance, in a religious context, networks could sanction opportunism, making corrupt deals more secure and predictable. This argument, according to Lambsdorff, holds particularly true if members within the network suppress ethical considerations that run counter to corruption.

A network that aims at advancing the material benefit of its members requires control mechanisms, in particular a hierarchical order. As Lambsdorff suggests:

Protestants are less embedded in hierarchical structures and as a result, they may be less easily involved in binding networks that disregard the negative externalities their actions impose on outsiders. Societies with a large share of Protestants cultivate attitudes in which individuals that are less reliable toward their kin and less subject to the material interests of their immediate environment. In these cases, individuals might even be willing to act opportunistically, particularly when the illegitimacy of a corrupt deal could provide an excuse for their behaviour. Thus, our assumption is that Protestant Christianity tends to decrease corruption because it increases the transactional difficulties that may accompany corrupt contracts (Lambsdorff, 2002, pp. 842-843).

Despite Lambsdorff’s conclusion, one should exercise caution in generalizing his findings, for two primary reasons: first, one could argue that data from a seventy-four country survey are not robust enough to make global generalizations, especially as Lambsdorff does not indicate the criteria used to identify the countries included, examine how representative they are or specify the sample sizes; and second, the study used the World Bank/University of Basel survey (originally designed for a different purpose) to determine levels of corruption. The fact that the variables used to determine corruption in the surveys measure its frequency, rather than the types and nature of corruption, makes Lambsdorff’s data problematic. Further, the data he uses fail to recognize causes and correlates of corruption, other than transaction costs and their relationship with corruption. This also makes his findings insufficiently reliable for such a general conclusion.

An important methodological concern with all the studies reviewed so far is their reliance on the TI-CPI (or, in Lambsdorff's case, a similar survey of perceptions) as their primary data source. The TI-CPI, which ranks countries according to the perceived degree of corruption, has been criticized because of its reliance on perceptions rather than 'hard' empirical data (see, for example, Alolo Al-hassan, 2006; Andersson and Heywood, 2009; Sampford et al, 2006). Some critics also argue against using the TI-CPI in this way in empirical studies because the evidential data on which the index is based is often scant for some countries, making them problematic to rank. Even if one were to see the TI-CPI as 'hard data', it does not rigorously analyse whether the difference in ranking between countries is statistically significant. For example, to conclude that Sierra Leone, ranked at 158, is considerably more corrupt than its neighbour Liberia, ranked at 138 (Transparency International 2008), is sloppy at best, disingenuous at worst. Because of these problems, the next section will look at studies based on the World Values Survey (WVS). This will enable us to suggest how different datasets may produce different results, despite – presumably – measuring the same phenomena.

Norris and Inglehart (2004) use the WVS to see if the Weberian thesis on Protestant values still applies. They explain: "The WVS contains four ten-point scale items that are designed to test the public's ethical attitudes, including how far people believe that certain actions are either always justified, never justified, or somewhere in-between. For the comparison, we take the strictest standard, which is the proportion that regarded certain actions as never justified". Their findings contradict those of Paldam (2001) and Beets (2007). Using the WVS data, Norris and Inglehart conclude:

Comparison across religious cultures shows that Protestant societies proved only moderately ethical on all four scales; usually slightly more ethical than Catholic societies but not displaying the highest ethical standards across all groups; indeed by contrast the Eastern religious cultures showed the highest disapproval of moral infringements. Any argument that today Protestant societies display higher ethical standards that may be conducive to business confidence and good governance is not supported by this analysis (Norris and Inglehart, 2004).

Another study utilizing the WVS is by Gatti et al (2003). They analyse data on attitudes towards bribery, concluding that "...family values and reported church attendance are associated with higher aversion to corruption. Interestingly, different religious beliefs do not seem to have a significant impact on BRIBE⁵ (with the exception of individuals of Jewish religion who consistently report a higher aversion to

corruption)” (2003, p.12). Interestingly, the authors make very little of the fact that 75.4 per cent of all respondents rank one (bribery is never justifiable), while only 8.8 per cent rank five or above (bribery is sometimes to always justifiable), regardless of religion, nationality, age or so on.

The WVS data do seem more convincing than the CPI in some respects, because the WVS does try to measure individuals’ attitudes towards corruption, including ‘morality’. Corruption may be endemic across systems and institutions, but it still involves the attitudes and actions of individuals, who experience corruption (and religion, for that matter) in an individualistic way. Individuals make the choice of whether or not to corrupt or be corrupted, to behave ethically or unethically. They may operate within institutions, but the emphasis in this literature – acknowledged or not – is on the attitudes, beliefs and choices of individuals. The WVS attempts to explore this; however, the results are still aggregated at the country level, so that the analysis does not acknowledge the variations within countries and, as a result, tells us little that is significant or even policy relevant.

The studies, no matter which data set they are based on, also do not take into account the massive variations between adherents of various faiths across the world. Religious people may engage with religion simply on a ritualistic level and may or may not be aware of what their sacred texts say about ethics and corruption. Even if they are aware of specific teaching, they may still choose to behave differently.

Much of the literature pointing to a causal relationship between religion and corruption is derived from ‘rational approaches similar to those analysed above, as favoured by the World Bank and others over the past decade or so. However, we are not at all convinced that it is possible to distinguish between religion and other cultural factors. The emphasis on hierarchy – within the family, say – is a good example of this. Some conservative independent Protestants in the US may have more in common with Catholics in Nigeria, for example, than they do with Anglicans in England. Likewise, liberal Catholics in France may have more in common with American Episcopalians than they do with conservative Irish Catholics. Researchers cannot easily separate religion – including both theology and association – from other social, political, economic, cultural and historical factors.

In these studies, there is little sense of the need to break down what 'religion' means: is it the teachings that are important? Is it the moral framework? Is it the importance of leadership or the nature of the community? They do, nevertheless, provide a fertile starting point for exploring some questions regarding the relationship between religion and corruption. However, we argue that these can only be adequately addressed through a pluralistic approach to research that privileges qualitative methodologies involving country and individual level empirical research. These ideally see both corruption and religion as lived experiences, where morality is constructed and is also constantly evolving and changing (see Marquette, forthcoming 2010). In such an approach to the issue, country rankings are meaningless, whereas an individual level of analysis that enables morality to be (re)injected into the discourse on corruption could help shape both academic and policy debates in a more engaging and significant way than the research available to date.

4 Is there a discursive relationship between morality, religion and corruption (and why does this matter)?

Although we do not feel that the evidence substantiates a causal relationship between religion and corruption, there is some evidence pointing to a discursive relationship instead. Discourse is important because it can convince individuals to act in a particular way or to avoid particular behaviours. If religious organizations and their adherents believe that the religious are more moral, and thus less corrupt, than the non-religious, this could have an impact on their behaviour.

There is increasing evidence of religious leaders urging their adherents to avoid corrupt activity. For example, in 2002, Pope John Paul II spoke out against corruption and called on all Catholics to refrain from engaging in corrupt practices (CNN, 2002; CWNNews, 2003). Beets reports that “the World Assembly of the World Council of Churches meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe in December, 1998 made clear statements condemning corruption. The organisation called on all of its member churches to urge governments to take legislative action against all forms of corruption” (2007). Indeed, in many countries, religious and faith-based organizations (FBOs) have been active in denouncing corruption.

Marshall and Van Saanen (2007) write that, “Because they have special ‘expertise’ in values and integrity, and because of their extensive presence and reach, faith institutions, leaders and networks offer a powerful potential force in raising governance standards in the work of development” (p. 231). In many ways, this seems like common sense, although Polzer warns that corruption policies are often based on what Schaffer called the “common sense policy fallacy” (Polzer, 2001, p.22). Schaeffer wrote,

There is a common, and apparently common-sense, way of presenting and talking about public policy. It is certainly convenient, partly because it is apparently innocent and non-problematic. Public policy is seen as something going on in a series of independently given realities... [This] misconception is employed by many people, including politicians and officials and social science protagonists in public policy. There is evidence to show that they at least know the common-sense model is faulty in that it does not describe what happens. The fault is admitted, but only in certain circumstances. Otherwise actors talk as though the model were true... This fault, however, does matter. It has ‘grave’ consequences (Schaeffer, 1984, p.143-44).

In addition, just as there are indeed many hard-working and often courageous religious leaders who have spoken out against corruption, there are also scandals involving corruption within religious organizations. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, a priest at the world's largest Hindu temple at Tirupati was arrested for selling temple jewels, just one of many corruption scandals to have emerged at the time (msn.com 22/08/09). In Ghana, also in 2009, a group of religious leaders spoke out against corruption within churches in that country (*The Spectator*, 2009). In Brazil, the footballer, Kaka, was linked to a church where the leaders were convicted of money laundering (Azzoni, 2008, p.7). In Nigeria, a pastor was suspended from a church near Abuja for embezzling millions of naira in church funds (*Friday*, 2006). Examples can be found from many countries. Calls for religious leaders to strengthen the fight against corruption can easily be weakened by cases such as these. Indeed, in a popular anti-corruption advertisement in India, sponsored by Tata Tea, a priest is just one of many corrupt actors portrayed. This suggests that the discourse on the relationship between religious leaders and corruption is more problematic than 'common sense' might suggest.

Another difficulty with linking religion and corruption is that religion and morality are not the same. There is also an important distinction to be made between public morality and private morality, as some evidence suggests that religion has considerably more impact upon the latter than it does on the former. Middleton and Putney, for example, differentiate between different types of moral standards to explain differences between the findings of various theoretical and empirical studies exploring the relationship between religion and delinquent behaviour. Previous studies, they explain, "have failed to find relationships between measures of religiosity and ethical behaviour, nondelinquency, humanitarianism, and altruism. In contrast, several studies have found the religious less likely to violate certain moral standards" (1962, p.142). The difference seems to be between *private* moral standards, such as sexual morals, and *public* moral standards, such as cheating. They elaborate as follows:

We believe that this particular confusion, and much of the confusion surrounding the relation between religion and morality, derives from failure to distinguish two different types of ethical standards – the ascetic and the social. Social standards proscribe actions which in general are harmful to the social group, and, we hypothesize, tend to be shared by the religious and nonreligious alike as part of a general social ideology. The fact that religious ideology may also proscribe these actions is incidental; we would hold

with Durkheim that religion is more a reflection of social morality than a source of it. Cheating, then, is a violation of a social standard, and it is not surprising that the nonreligious engage in it no more often than the religious. In contrast, ascetic standards – abstinence from sensual indulgences, gambling, and the like – derive primarily from an ascetic religious tradition. Within the context of religion violations of ascetic standards may be held spiritually harmful to the perpetrator. But since such violations are usually not directly or obviously harmful to the social group – at least in moderation – ascetic standards have less persuasiveness to the secularly oriented individual. He [sic] is therefore more likely to violate them. In short, we hypothesize that differences in behaviour between the religious and nonreligious are confined to specific areas and are a product of differences in standards rather than a differential upholding of standards (Middleton and Putney, 1962, p.142-143; see also Marquette, forthcoming 2010).

Their own survey, which asked about both attitudes and actual actions regarding delinquent behaviour, corroborates this. They found that the religious are more likely to believe that anti-ascetic actions are wrong and are less likely to engage in them. However, when it comes to anti-social actions, there was no difference between the religious and the nonreligious, in terms of either attitudes or violations of their own standards by engaging in anti-social actions (Middleton and Putney, 1962, p.151).⁶

This study, like many others that followed, was conducted in the U.S., but there have not been similar studies of which we are aware in developing countries. Indeed, the distinction between public and private morality is contested by many in developing country contexts (see, for example, Ekeh, 1975). As Gupta reminds us, “the discourse of corruption varies a great deal from one country to another, dependent as it is on particular historical trajectories and the specific grammars of public culture” (1995, p.393). In Nigeria, Smith (2007, p.5) argues that,

...when Nigerians talk about corruption, they refer not only to the abuse of state offices for some kind of private gain but also to a whole range of social behaviour in which various forms of morally questionable deception enable the achievement of wealth, power, or prestige as well as more mundane ambitions. Nigerian notions of corruption encompass everything from government bribery and graft, rigged elections, and fraudulent business deals, to the diabolical abuse of occult powers, medical quackery, cheating in school, and even deceiving a lover.

Thus public and private morality are said to overlap in many developing countries, making this a false dichotomy. Corruption may be thought of in terms of things like adultery and homosexuality; the stoning of women in Northern Nigeria following the introduction of Sharia – itself introduced largely in

response to widespread public sector corruption – is part and parcel of the same discourse, particularly when coming from religious sources (Smith, 2007, p.185-6; Harnischfeger, 2008). Indeed, in the *Times of Zambia*, Vice-President Mumba “encouraged the church to stand out against ‘unbiblical practices’”; the title of the story is “Zambia gets ‘tough on corruption and gays’” (2003). If donors and others too eagerly enlist religious leaders into the fight against corruption, they could conceivably find themselves embroiled on the wrong side of debates in their own countries about human rights. It is simply not possible for donors to hold hands with religious leaders while they speak out against corruption, but then to sneak off the podium when the sermon turns to gays and women.

5 Conclusion

Bukovansky (2006) has suggested an alternative to the current anti-corruption discourse that speaks not to religious values but to republican ones. As many of the principles on which the global discourse rests lie within a (neo)liberal discourse that is discredited in many parts of the developing world, he argues,

The republican discourse... offers a richer and more resonant conception of corruption than does liberal-rationalist discourse... in that it evokes the human capacity for moral agency in civic life... If we ground anti-corruption discourse more firmly in republican theory, it may come to appear less like an externally imposed standard and more like an exhortation to leaders to fulfil the promise of self-determination and full sovereignty. Whether or not such argument yields more effective results, it is more likely to be perceived as legitimate (Bukovansky, 2006, p.202).

Although this seems to offer a way forward for anti-corruption discourse, the republican discourse is no less a Western construct than a liberal-rationalist one, and again does not take into account the ways in which 'public' and 'private' may not stand as a dichotomy in many non-Western countries; nor does it take on board the difficulty in many developing countries of speaking of a 'nation' to which republican discourse can speak. What Bukovansky's paper points to, however, which is to our minds of great significance, is the power of discourse in creating a political community committed to an anti-corruption agenda.

Academics and activists are unlikely to be able to prove a direct causal relationship between religion and corruption – either positive or negative – and certainly not with the methodologies employed so far. What seems more promising is the possibility of using religion to change the *discourse* around corruption. In many parts of the world, religion maintains a primordial hold on people's values, attitudes and behaviour that democratic institutions simply do not,⁷ and as such, it remains an important potential source of power. What is needed, we would argue on the basis of the literature reviewed in this paper, is for religious leaders and organizations to include their own adherents in any calls to fight corruption. In addition, a more nuanced understanding of what is actually meant by 'corruption' in different countries, and among the faithful in particular, is needed for any such discourse to have a chance of success.

Notes

- ¹ The TI-CPI is a 'survey of surveys' that looks at perceptions of corruption and then ranks countries according to their score. It can be found at **www.transparency.org**, along with an explanation of its methodology.
- ² Religiosity, although not formally defined in the Pew Global Attitudes Project <http://pewglobal.org/>, is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "religiousness, religious feeling or sentiment" or "affected or excessive religiousness". Measuring religiosity seems to be about self-definition as a member of a religious community, regular attendance at religious services and regular engagement in religious practices such as ritual and prayer.
- ³ As Alolo Al-hassan et al (2007) point out: "The starting point for any meaningful understanding of the political science literature on the role of religion in public life is secularism. Of all the disciplines, political science (with perhaps the exception of economics) is the one that is most secular in its outlook" (p.7).
- ⁴ Paldam claims that this supports Rousseau's claim about the 'original state', as opposed to that of Hobbes.
- ⁵ Responses to the WVS question that asks whether it is justified for someone to accept a bribe in the course of their duties are coded according to whether it can always be justified (rank=10), never be justified (rank=1) or something in between.
- ⁶ Interestingly, women were much stricter in terms of moral standards relating to anti-ascetic actions, particularly sexual behaviour, but there was little difference between men and women in terms of anti-social actions, and in one action particularly – stealing from hotels – women were much more permissive than men.
- ⁷ The authors are grateful to Professor Jyotirmaya Sharma, University of Hyderabad, for this point.

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