Conversations with an Ayatollah

He was an angry Ayatollah; an angry anti-United States Ayatollah, and I was the head of a field office of a US NGO funded by the US government.

‘Where do you get your funding from?’ He forcefully enquired through a translator.

It was around 8pm and we had found our way through the narrow streets of old city in the centre of Najaf, stopping a few blocks from where the nephew of the Prophet Mohammad, fourth Caliph and namesake of the Shia, Imam Ali, is buried. Being late 2003, the security situation had already deteriorated in Iraq, and I was visiting ayatollahs in an attempt to explain to them what we did, so that they would then speak on our behalf to their followers. Ayatollah Sheikh Bashir al-Najafi had just accused me of being a CIA spy sent to assess the layout of his compound. Somehow, thankfully, we had managed to move on from that and onto where our money came from.

I began with a very basic overview of the international humanitarian and development industry, ‘...some organisations take money from the Coalition Provisional Authority, some have no experience and come here with little idea of what they are doing, some come to spread the word of the Bible, while others are professional independent organisations that work on the basic needs of people. We are non-religious, we are not-for-profit, and all of us came here voluntarily.’

‘Who is your funder?’ He must have had savvy advisors as he was focused on getting an answer to this question, but at least I had some time to think of a response.

‘We have different donors—average people who donate money by, for example, putting money into tin cans at supermarkets.'
Secondly, we get money from rich people who, when they die, donate their estate…’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘very much like we do…’

Finally, something in common! I emphasised this point and mentioned it again, hoping that the direction of the conversation would change before I had to explain why we took US government money. I continued, ‘We get money from UNICEF…’

Interrupting again, he stated, ‘UNICEF is a part of the UN. They are not independent, are they?’

At this stage I decided to just get it over with and plough through. ‘We write proposals that we then offer to various donors. We are not government contractors, we include the Iraqi staff when we decide what we want to do, and then we offer a proposal to donors to see if they will give us the money for the project.’ I watched intently as the translation was delivered before adding, ‘One of our donors is the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. They are a part of the US government.’

That was 2003.

In 2010 and 2011, I decided to go back to the places where I had worked to see what happened to the people and projects. The book No Dancing, No Dancing: Inside the Global Humanitarian Crisis is based upon that journey, following my return visits to Iraq, South Sudan and East Timor.

I visited the angry Ayatollah, who by that stage seemed a lot worldlier in his understanding of the international aid system. I also met hospital administrators, governors, village chiefs, former staff, and most importantly, those who were at the heart of our activities.

In many cases the material output of the projects — wash points, shelters, latrines, and even health centres — had
wasted away. In some cases, it was because of a lack of funding for maintenance, in others, the life span had passed or – as in the case of the Eastern Bank in Wau, South Sudan – the neglect was intentional.

The Eastern Bank Camp was established in 1998, and over the years it had developed organically, leaving it with a spaghetti logic to the layout. In 2002, I had helped set up an extensive program that included water wells, wash points, drainage and latrines. We had trained local people to maintain them and reached an agreement with the government to provide spare parts with the support of UNICEF. When I returned, very little was still operational. It was both confounding and heartbreaking.

I wanted to know where we went wrong.

I found Chief Angelo Uraya Dut sitting under a mango tree on a plastic chair. The Chief’s silver beard and faded red baseball cap were all that set him apart from the others who were dressed in a similar style.

With the help of my friend Charles, who was traveling with me, we introduced ourselves.

It took some time to get to the heart of the matter. According to the chief and others sitting alongside him under the wide canopy of the mango tree, the government was intent on taking their land. Wau had grown since the peace and the Eastern Bank Camp was in a prime location. Their fears were that if they improved the land by maintaining the infrastructure then it would become even more attractive for the government.

We thought that we had foreseen every eventuality by providing training and securing the spare parts, but we hadn’t foreseen this. Without property ownership they didn’t want to build a better neighbourhood, without property ownership they had no future.
Looking back at this journey and meetings with people such as the Ayatollah and Chief Angelo, one of the common themes that emerged was that it isn’t just more money that we need, but more time. The contractual constraints, along with expectations of change, force international aid workers to shoehorn projects into timeframes that are too short to see through a situation. The Eastern Bank Camp was supported for as long as the crisis was present because the funding was earmarked for humanitarian purposes, but after that the international community moved on, not knowing of the new challenge the people faced.

The Ayatollah, though, has the time. He is entrenched in his own community, as are the hundreds of staff I had engaged with through the course of a decade of humanitarian work who chose to remain behind long after I had left. It was these people, like the Ayatollah, who are continuing to lead change. People like Osorio who accompanied me on my journey through East Timor had become an advisor to a Minister in East Timor or Nawal, who I reconnected with when visiting Najaf, was at that time a leading female politician in Iraq. Others started businesses or took up senior positions in the government, taking with them ideas that they learned and embraced while working for us.

Despite finding some failed projects, I came away with a sense of optimism, knowing that we had contributed to sustainable change through a focus on empowerment of the staff by providing training and elevating them into decision-making roles.

Similarly, I look back at my engagement with community leaders such as the Ayatollah, and suspect that such conversations had a much more lasting impact than many of the bricks and mortar projects.

Although focusing on staff and building relationships with the community may lack easily measurable outcome indicators, it is
through these efforts, and not bricks and mortar projects, that sustainable change will be entrenched.

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See no religion, hear no religion, speak no religion

It has been five years since a post relating to religion and development appeared on Devpolicy. In those intervening years the word ‘religion’ only appears in six other posts, in each case it was included in the text for reasons other than in any way associated with development practice. For many Australian policy makers and practitioners this may seem a wise choice. Engaging with religion could risk legitimising a potentially divisive force or give standing to views that are contrary to what is needed for progress. What value could engaging with religion bring? In my book Religion and Post-Conflict Statebuilding I examine this question within the context of statebuilding.

To begin we should acknowledge the different religious contexts of most developing countries compared to those of many developed countries, such as Australia. By cross-tabulating the World Bank’s list of fragile and failed states to data available in the Gallup World View database (2006–2010), we find that on average 91% of people living within fragile states consider religion important to their daily lives compared to 50% in Australia (Nielson Poll 2009 [pdf]). It is not just failed states or those countries that tend to grab the extremist religious headlines that value religion, within our region Fiji was found to be the fourth most religious [pdf] society in the world.

As those of us who have worked overseas know, it is in more
than an individual’s spiritual growth that religion plays a role. Religious institutions themselves are actively involved in society, be it through the provision of services to legitimising authority and entrenching values that contribute to statehood and nationhood. One marker of the standing of religious institutions in society from which their influence spreads is the level of trust they hold. 80% of people in the World Bank’s list of fragile states have confidence in religious institutions compared with only 48% in their government. Another indicator is the view of what role religion should play in politics. A Pew Research Centre poll (Table 1) found large numbers of Muslim people from Europe through to Asia and the Middle East thought that religious leaders should have some influence, if not a large influence, in politics.

Table 1: Percentage of Muslims who say that religious leaders should have a small or a large political influence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Large influence”</th>
<th>“Some influence”</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47</td>
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</tbody>
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Note: Countries selected by author. Source: Pew Research Centre – Religion & Public Life.

This prominence of religion in politics has been considered within academia in the context of its divisiveness during
conflict, as a spoiler during peace or as an inhibitor of development. There is limited research on the potential positive role of religion, and when it has been undertaken it is usually considered through a secular lens.

One of Australia’s leading experts on religion and development, Matthew Clarke of Deakin University, has written extensively on religion and development, noting the size of the Catholic Church’s humanitarian work or the extent of communal support instigated by faith-based groups. But even his work is largely presented through a secular lens. This can be problematic, as I have previously written about, because by doing so we project temporal humanist ambitions, such as the reduction of poverty or freedom, as ends in and of themselves when within religion they are only a means to, or sometimes dangerous diversions from, a spiritual end.

Understanding how religion can contribute to peacebuilding, statebuilding or development beyond a limited secular view requires reflecting on how decision making occurs within religious groups—in particular, how resources are allocated and towards which ends. Alternatively phrased: why would a religious group contribute its considerable resources, including high levels of legitimacy and trust, to what could be counterproductive to its cause, such as secular governance, plural nationhood or the adoption of certain rights?

To understand how such decisions are made we must begin outside the secular, rational world in which Western development and academia operates and instead engage with the cosmology of each religion through an understanding of their theology. To presume that every religion has a teleology (end goal) that aligns with a secular humanistic one is not only wrong but goes against some of the basic principles of development, namely respecting local ambitions and definitions of progress. Knowing the teleology of a religion suggests how resources will be allocated.
This becomes a challenge when some communities’ interpretations of their religious or cultural values do not align with those that Western donors are willing to support. Finding where the two overlap, those hopes and ambitions that ‘we’ agree upon is where religion can aid the Western development community. To do so requires moving beyond simplistic engagements of religion in which particular verses or sayings are selectively cut and pasted to match our world view, and instead moving towards recognising it as an alternative world view that may not align in all cases.

Denis Dragovic is the author of ‘Religion and Post-Conflict Statebuilding: Roman Catholic and Sunni Islamic Perspectives’ (Palgrave 2015) and holds a PhD in political theology from the University of St Andrews (UK). He has also worked for over a decade in conflict and post-conflict countries in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

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Taking on the bean counters: a possible approach under the Coalition for managing NGOs

Appropriate oversight or petty bean counting, responsible auditing or unwelcome interference, it depends on your perspective. In my last year in Iraq as country director for the US organization CHF International, I had the unpleasant and time-consuming task of overseeing four audits of our operations — USAID program audit, US Department of Defense DCCA audit, federally mandated external audit, and an internal audit of one of our operations — in addition to an overzealous pair of SIGIR investigators playing CSI. These were post-
expenditure checks. The pre-expenditure interference, that is, involvement in how we were to allocate funding, was top down, intrusive and directive. Such an experience may come as no surprise to many contractors or consultants, but the award instruments I was working with were grants, not contracts, and the projects were community development and microfinance, and were fundamentally based on bottom up planning approaches. Although my experience is from within a U.S. organisation, it seems representative of a more general direction in the aid industry.

Andrew Natsios described the broader conundrum in his meticulously argued 2010 tome: The Clash of the Counter-bureaucracy and Development (reviewed by Cate Rogers on this site in November 2010). As the one time President of World Vision (USA) and Administrator of USAID, Nastios is well positioned to see the challenge. His paper begins with a lengthy quote from Wellington, worth reproducing in an abridged version here:

Gentlemen,

[M]y officers have been diligently complying with your requests … We have enumerated our saddles, bridles, tents and tent poles, and all manner of sundry items for which His Majesty’s Government holds me accountable … Unfortunately the sum of one shilling and nine pence remains unaccounted for in one infantry battalion’s petty cash … This reprehensible carelessness may be related to the pressure of circumstance, since we are at war with France … This brings me to my present purpose, which is to request elucidation of my instructions from His Majesty’s Government so that I may better understand why I am dragging an army over these barren plains. I construe that perforce it must be one of two alternative duties, as given below. I shall pursue either with the best of my ability, but I cannot do both:

1.) To train an army of uniformed British clerks in Spain for
the benefit of the accountants and copy-boys in London or, perchance …

2.) To see to it the forces of Napoleon are driven out of Spain.

Your most obedient servant,

Wellington

This quote reflects Natsios’ frustration with the aid industry and establishes the basis for his taking exception to the empowering of the ‘counter-bureaucracy’. He writes:

One of the little understood, but most powerful and disruptive tensions in established aid agencies lies in the clash between the compliance side of aid programs and the technical, program side. The essential balance between these two tensions in development programs – accountability and control versus good development practice – has now been skewed to such a degree in the U.S. aid system (and in the World Bank as well) that the imbalance threatens program integrity. (p2)

Australia funded World Bank activities in 2009-10 to a total of $466 million. This should raise concern if for no other reason than Natsios’ argument. But I suggest that it is not only the U.S. aid system and the World Bank that has gone too far in pursuing accountability and control but the donor community in general. The 2009 Australian National Audit Office report on AusAID made this point, and it was repeated in the Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness (IRAE) report:

AusAID’s cautious approach to funds provision, while minimising the risk of corruption, has sometimes prevented resources from getting where they are most needed. Where efforts have been made to allocate resources to service delivery, the imposition of
Having spent most of my career working through grant mechanisms, my reflections on these concerns lie at the micro-level and are primarily focused on the misunderstanding, or lack of understanding, among donor representatives (and probably more so contractors managing grants) of the difference between a grant and a contract and how one should administer it. This is not an issue of choosing partnerships versus contractors, but rather one of where the authority to make decisions lies when the government has chosen to adopt a partnership approach. The IRAE inferred this when it raised the issue of micromanagement and organisational culture: “AusAID staff have traditionally dealt mainly with partner governments and contractors. AusAID’s culture needs to adjust so that engagement with a range of partners, from large multilateral organisations to business groups to NGOs and community groups, becomes second nature.” (p182)

Broadly speaking, contracts tend toward top down development through a predetermined mechanism, while grants, theoretically, offer the flexibility to facilitate bottom up solutions. Grants need not only be thought of as community development mechanisms but can be equally applied at the other end of town, namely ‘high’ level institutional strengthening or state building. Determining which of the two is adopted is a critical decision, each with its own merits depending upon the circumstances and interests of the government. But where we seem to be going wrong is in making the assumption that once the type of agreement and its clauses has been chosen, they will be managed accordingly. This has not been my experience. Donors are increasingly managing grants as contracts, especially under the ‘whole-of-government’ approach, and in doing so are both undermining the fundamental purpose of choosing a grant mechanism and weakening
development outcomes. This is due either to a mistaken belief that ‘whole-of-government’ means more government control, or pressure from other departments for donor agencies to be team players and pull their grantees into line and exert more oversight. Whatever the reason, the result is weakened development outcomes. For example, in situations where capacity building (government) or empowerment (community) is sought, efforts are greatly hampered if agencies are limited to the implementation of a predetermined suite of solutions or are regularly told to override an interlocutor’s inputs.

In a recent Saturday Age (18/08/2012) article Coalition gets razors ready to slice bulky bureaucracy, Kevin Andrews, the Shadow Minister for Families, Housing and Human Services, in referring to his approach to streamline the voluntary and charitable sector within his portfolio said: “Our thinking is that organisations in civil society … are not instruments or agencies of government, they are formed in the community … It is not for the government to control them or tell them what they should be doing, the government should be empowering them rather than seeking to control them.” Mr Andrews says that other Shadow Ministers are also being asked to use the approach “as a guide to what they can do in their portfolio areas”.

Were Julie Bishop to embrace a similar approach in Foreign Affairs, would a Coalition government emphasize outcomes based grants over output based contracts? And would this mean further emphasising the role of NGOs, and possibly increasing the percentage spent through them as a vehicle of aid delivery? Probably not. Hopefully it would mean acknowledging that grants shouldn’t be managed as contracts, that a different culture is required to work with grants, and a more arm’s length approach to oversight is required.

The best of the leaks that may shed further light on the Coalition’s thinking in this respect are the Coalition Speaker’s Notes (1 July 2012). Other than suggesting that
AusAID be assigned full ministerial status (though no comment on a seat in Cabinet) they reinforce the need for AusAID to meet strict performance benchmarks. There is little guidance though on what these will be and how this would be achieved, other than referencing the IRAE and ANAO reports.

If the Coalition is seeking to improve globally agreed development benchmarks, then I suggest it consider the question of control, namely who controls decision making on the increasing segment of partnership agreements and how that control is wielded. Pertinent questions to be asked include: whether AusAID has made the cultural shift from its historical bi-lateral and contracts perspective to a partnership approach, or if the management style remains the same and it is simply the paperwork that is different; and whether there is an overly cautious approach that burdens partners with unnecessary and redundant checks and balances and indirectly extends control and hampers new initiatives.

Ultimately the question is whether a ‘counter-bureaucracy’ would prevail under a Coalition government or if they would adopt a Kevin Andrews’ style approach that respects the fundamental nature of civil society. Let’s hope it would be the latter.

Denis Dragovic has worked in the humanitarian and development sector through both contract and grant mechanisms for twelve years and is currently completing a doctorate on the role of religious institutions in post conflict state building at the University of St Andrews.
In Afghanistan, expectations without obligations?

Iraq is the canary in the coalmine for the Western state building effort and as such should not be forgotten in discussions on what lies ahead for Afghanistan.

My last trip to Iraq, a quick foray to catch up with friends and see how the country had progressed was in 2010, just as the last American soldiers had packed their bags and shipped out. Thoughts from that visit come to mind as our attention focuses on the future of our involvement in Afghanistan after the planned departure of Western troops.

Iraq remains an image of contradictions. Vibrantly alive, looking towards a potentially bright future and yet tragically paralysed, mired in patronage politics. While the politicians squabbled for eight months over forming a government following the 2010 elections the people continued to go about rebuilding lives lost to decades of oppression and war. The machinations that continue to play out in Baghdad (and equally in Kabul) over the personally enriching cabinet positions, lucrative contracts and comfortable foreign appointments are seen as distant and irrelevant to the daily lives of the people not affiliated and dependent for their livelihood on a particular party or tribe. Few of my friends in Iraq had much to say about politics and the politicians; instead they talked about their future as if the two were of a different time and place, disassociated from one another. This disassociation is at the root of the challenge that faces both countries. No matter how many schools are built, kilometres of roads constructed or government institutions established, without an engaged populace the future will be bleak.

Reports of life returning to the streets of the towns in Uruzgan province, improving human development indicators and
better security metrics can be heartening changes (if accepted on face value), but the evident disconnect between the politicians and the people should be read as an early warning sign of troubled times ahead. Afghanistan’s sustained development and the hope of achieving the original goal of the country becoming a peaceful and responsible international player requires more than money and resources, which has been the strategy to date. Unless the elected are held accountable by the people (not the international community), who are vested with an interest to participate in the process of governance, then the already stark divide between the interests of the individuals in government and the governed will only grow larger with tragic consequences.

Today’s challenge for Afghanistan’s international partners, including Australia, is to ramp up our focus on ensuring that the amount of democracy supplied, which we have done extremely well on, is met with an equal amount demanded by the people, for which we have fallen short. An imbalance in either direction can undermine stability. The myriad of elections that have been held, long list of legal reforms enacted and new government institutions established by donor aid money only serve the elite when there is a limited grassroots counterbalance. Building this demand for democracy and good governance is a crucial aspect of development, yet largely forgotten in Iraq and Afghanistan (the Community Action Program and the National Solidarity Program, respectively being the exception). Our rush to structurally recreate foreign countries in our own image has blinded us to the convoluted and often precarious journey that Australia took in developing an understanding of the obligations and expectations of the governed and the government.

This is in part as a result of the militarization of state building [pdf] and our consumerist conception of progress in which the quantity of goods and services provided, largely from behind security walls and concertina wire, is seen as a
fair measure of success. But building a stable society takes more than material development; it requires the intangible and hard to measure concept of establishing a social contract. In Iraq and Afghanistan, through the process of focusing on ‘delivering’ aid we’ve created a skewed social contract full of expectations without any obligations. The government provides services without a sense of obligation to the people and the people accept these services without any obligation to the country.

When I met with the governor of the Iraqi province of Najaf in 2010 he was quick to tell me that one of the priorities for international organizations in Iraq is to help train people in civics. To help them understand how to ensure their voices are heard and to lobby for change in a constructive, not destructive manner. These are wise words that we would be well advised to heed but they require an acknowledgement of the inadequacies of our current approach and an overhaul of the mechanisms by which our aid is being delivered.

If the state building endeavour in Afghanistan stumbles, as it appears to have, people will then blame democracy for their ethnically fractured and religiously fraught politics and the constant inaction and infighting. They will then further withdraw from their social contract obligations as citizens, reluctant to demand representation or to hold their government accountable leaving a corrupt and self-serving clique of leaders. Why should the people risk their lives for something that only enriches the elites? Unless more attention is paid to the intangible and difficult to measure concept of a social contract by empowering the people to counterbalance an already empowered government that we enthroned then we’re unlikely to see an Afghanistan worthy of the tens of thousands of lives lost in the name of democracy for many decades or even generations to come.

Denis Dragovic headed humanitarian and development programs in Iraq for three years and continued to consult on United
Nations development projects for another two years. He has in addition participated in the state building processes of East Timor and South Sudan and is currently completing a doctorate on Christian and Muslim theologies of post conflict state building at the Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics within the School of Divinity at St Andrews University, Scotland.