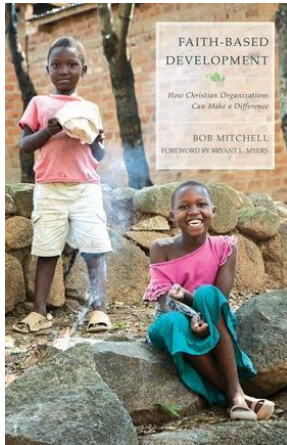


BOOK REVIEW

Faith-Based Development: How Christian Organizations Can Make a Difference

By Bob Mitchell

Reviewed by Tiffany Butler



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For the second half of the 20th century, Christians working in humanitarian relief and development experienced a shrinking space within the development sector. Throughout this era, the secular approach—primarily, but not solely—motivated by modernity and the Enlightenment, became increasingly hostile toward faith-based organizations (FBOs). In response, many Christian FBOs felt compelled to conform to a secular humanitarian approach in order to continue participating in the sector, particularly when seeking government funding. More recently, however, the mood seems to be changing. Though secular development agencies and agendas largely quarantined FBOs from serious consideration as respectable NGOs for many years, there is now a growing awareness, even among secular humanitarian actors, that faith should no longer be relegated to the sidelines of development work.

In light of this important change, the book by Bob Mitchell, *Faith-Based Development: How Christian Organizations Can Make a Difference*, encourages Christians to recapture their vocation to work faithfully as humanitarian workers. They should not conform secular worldviews in their practice, but rather allow

their Christian worldview to empower and sustain their work in development. The purpose of the book is to examine the devaluation of FBOs in international development and to attempt to redress this imbalance through an examination of the religious motifs that undergird Christian orthopraxy, which studies show resonate with the poor and marginalized in the Majority World (155-156). To showcase the relevance of FBOs, Mitchell utilizes internally produced reports and interviews from World Vision Australia, which examine the role of faith in development work. While largely targeted at Christian relief, development, and advocacy groups, Mitchell's intended audience also includes secular NGOs, governments, academics, and other faith-based practitioners of other faiths.

The book is divided into three main sections. Part One, "Christian Heart, Secular Profession," explores the value of the Christian approach in development. Mitchell gives a brief but powerful history lesson in the secularization of development work and the resurgence of a serious examination of the role of faith in relief, development, and advocacy in recent years. Humanitarian workers across the spectrum have come to realize that multi-dimensional problems necessitate multi-dimensional solutions. FBOs have a responsibility to articulate for themselves the distinctives of their faith identity in the humanitarian sphere. As they confidently stand in this faith identity, they should also faithfully live out their vocation among partner communities and the secular humanitarian entities they interact with.

Part Two, "Christian Motifs and Their Impact on Development Work," constitutes the meat of the book and begins with an exploration of four theories of change humanitarian workers have typically utilized in international development. Mitchell argues that while theories of change have been critiqued from a Christian faith perspective, they do not pose a fundamental conflict with FBO faith commitments. He posits that the difference between a faith-based approach and a secular approach to development does not depend on their selection of a theory of change, but on other factors that lead to distinctive praxes (37). As FBOs

nuance or reframe theories of change within their own understanding of Christian theology and scripture, case studies reveal FBOs produce praxes that are especially effective in development work. In order to develop these distinctive praxes, Mitchell urges Christian organizations thoughtfully to examine the Christian meta-narrative that informs their vocation. When this vocational identity is matched with sector excellence, the FBO has a distinct advantage in development work; this is primarily due to a theistic worldview that is shared by the Majority World.

Mitchell argues that ‘neutrality’ in development work does not exist. He presents data that reveal theistic societies have more affinity with FBOs, even those of different faiths, than they do with secular entities. This is an important revelation, as it flies in the face of standard arguments deployed by secular development agencies that religion is intrinsically divisive and that religious neutrality is desirable (48, 58). True, religion has too often been weaponized as a tool of division, but new data shows that Christian humanitarian workers can be assets rather than liabilities in some contexts. When FBOs operate faithfully in their field, they are often seen as devout adherents, and a mutual respect is fostered with other theistic societies, as seen among Christian faith workers in moderate Sunni contexts (48). Secular organizations that do not share a theistic affinity with communities, then, are automatically seen as outsiders and their ‘neutrality’ is at times perceived as a form of insensitive imperialism (83).

Part Three, “Faith, Development, and Accountability,” adds some practical considerations for FBO practitioners, particularly Chapter 15, which discusses “Accountability for Crosscutting Themes.” This section examines crosscutting issues like disability and inclusion, gender equality, care for the environment, and child protection. Mitchell considers each issue in turn, followed by a thoughtful Christian reflection and pragmatic response for each theme. He concludes the book by exposing the false divide between professionalism and faith. Mitchell writes, “Professional skills and love of God are not incongruous. They go hand-in-hand and enter their proper relationship when the former serve the latter” (166). In other words, Christian organizations are encouraged to hold to the distinctives of their faith, even as they consider the professional and sectoral tools they will deploy in their own authentic way.

Does Mitchell accomplish his goal to examine the devaluation of FBOs in international development and to attempt to redress this imbalance through an examination of the religious motifs that undergird Christian orthopraxy? Yes, he accomplishes this beautifully. Through an examination of specific faith-based reflections (theology) and practices (orthopraxy) that produce real-world transformation, Mitchell

convincingly argues for the necessity of FBOs and their invaluable impact on international development.

Depending on who is reading the book, some may desire further specificity about case studies referenced in the main body of the text, as these are often discussed without a lot of detail. Such an audience might benefit from an appendix with a deeper study of at least some of the World Vision evaluation reports. As it is, however, Mitchell’s review of these studies, as discussed throughout the book, do raise the book’s appeal to a wider audience, which aligns with Mitchell’s explicit intention—that the book is written with multiple audiences in mind (xvi).

Thankfully, there are other books that take up this challenge to go into further detail on the specifics of transformational development case studies. A prime example is *Walking with the Poor* by Bryant Myers, who also happens to write a glowing foreword to Mitchell’s book. Myers notes that Mitchell’s Faith-Based Development addresses the need of the hour—explaining why Christian development agencies have been successful at professionalizing without secularizing, and also providing a roadmap for how that might be accomplished. Mitchell, indeed, accomplishes this in his inspirational and approachable book. His clarion call is to exhort FBOs to recover, or perhaps discover, confidence in their faith tradition and how that makes a world of difference for humanitarian practitioners.

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