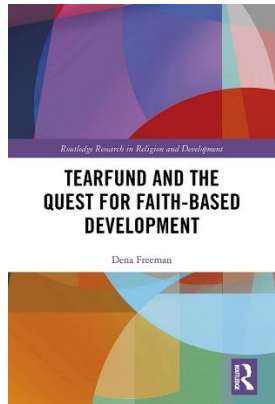


BOOK REVIEW

Tearfund and the Quest for Faith-Based Development

By Dena Freeman

Reviewed by **Catriona Dejean and Nina Kurlberg**



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In 2018 Tearfund celebrated its 50-year anniversary. To celebrate this significant milestone since its birth from the Evangelical Alliance in 1968, Tearfund committed to an organizational sabbath and embarked upon a year of reflection and introspection on its rich history. From responding to the humanitarian needs of the Biafra war in Nigeria, to being a leading voice on climate change, Tearfund has been on a journey of adaptation, learning, and spiritual exploration. Dr. Dena Freeman was commissioned in 2017 to look back over the 50-year history and explore how faith has formed and shaped the organization and its practice. The research was taken further by Freeman into this book. The book is rich and does well to draw out some of the tensions and complexity surrounding Tearfund's journey to outwork its faith in practice over the years. Yet this review suggests that the author has misunderstood what is at the heart of these tensions, which has ultimately influenced her analysis. Tearfund has always been faith-based, so it is less about a quest with an end destination, and more about a journey; one that has enabled the organization to navigate the complex space between mission and development.

Through the course of the book Freeman narrates a history of Tearfund, with a particular focus on the ways in which faith is evidenced in its activities "on the ground" (13). Academically, Freeman has situated the book within the field of religion and development. As

such, her analysis of Tearfund is guided by the three themes most prevalent within the existing body of literature in this field: work that seeks to categorize faith-based organizations (FBOs) to enable comparison in relation both to each other and to so-called secular organizations; studies that explore the role of faith in faith-based development organizations (FBDOs); and research that examines the role of religion in development. Freeman aims to "speak into" a gap within this body of academic literature by offering an in-depth analysis of Tearfund as one particular FBDO (3). It is one of the first books of its kind within the field of religion and development.

To lay the foundations for her analysis, Freeman first provides a brief history of humanitarian and development organizations in the UK from as early as the nineteenth century leading up to Tearfund's establishment in 1968. She highlights the complex dynamics between "Christian social engagement, overseas missionary activity, and the growth of secular humanitarianism," noting that these foreshadow many of the internal debates that have arisen within the organization over the years (19). The following chapter surveys Tearfund's early years, focusing particularly on the evolution of its identity through this period from being a missionary organization that supported relief and development work to becoming the UK's largest evangelical charity. As well as sending personnel overseas, by the early 1990s Tearfund was awarding grants to missionaries and partner organizations through both an Overseas Relief and Development Department and an Evangelism and Christian Education Department (52). Yet Freeman highlights the growing discomfort within the organization during this time regarding the separation between the "spiritual" and the "material" in its work (57), a theme that continues throughout the book.

Freeman then explores what she sees as the next season of the organization's existence, during which its relief and development work underwent a major process of professionalization, leading to Tearfund gaining increasing respect and recognition within the sector. Secularization consequently became its greatest risk and from the early 2000s was at the top of the Board's risk register (78). During this period, Tearfund

also established its advocacy and campaigning work, recruited its first theology advisor and adopted the framework of integral mission. The final chapters of the book describe Tearfund's efforts to develop and mainstream church-centered approaches that empowered the local church as the "central actor in community development" (138). Freeman views the initiatives developed during this time as among the more innovative aspects of Tearfund's work. Yet she challenges the extent to which it has been possible to implement this approach throughout the organization, arguing that it is still wrestling with "fundamental questions about how to effectively combine evangelism and development, whether it is possible to be a mainstream NGO and yet still retain an evangelical identity, and what it means to do faith-based development" (157).

Throughout her research and analysis, Freeman has brought an "outsider" perspective to Tearfund and its work (Merton 1972). This has been incredibly valuable and enriching for the organization. Not only has it been insightful to get a glimpse of how Tearfund is perceived from the outside, and more specifically among the academic community, but it has also illuminated areas for growth and learning. For example, Freeman has shed light on some of the organization's internal narratives, such as how to continue to demonstrate impact, balancing risks as an FBDO within restricted contexts, and how to leverage church and community mobilization processes given they are different compared with other development processes.

Nevertheless, Freeman's understanding of the insider perspective is weak, which has impacted her analysis. For example, she does not fully appreciate the distinction between "faith" and "religion" and the significance of this for an FBO such as Tearfund. Although Freeman's use of these terms within the book is referred to in a footnote (17), it is surprising that this is not given deeper treatment within the main body of the text, particularly bearing in mind the book's emphasis on faith. She seems to have misunderstood the question at the root of the internal debates and tensions within the organization, which are not at their core about how to combine development with evangelism, but rather about how the organization can more truly express its faith through its work. This might appear to be a subtle difference, but it has implications for Freeman's analysis.

As is clear from her framing of the book, Freeman views the dominant feature of Tearfund's most recent decade as being its efforts to become a distinctively evangelical FBO, having been established as a missionary organization and gradually evolving to become a well-respected development NGO. From Freeman's perspective, Tearfund's struggle to combine evangelism and development, noted above, has been

the common thread running through each of these three stages. Yet from Tearfund's perspective, the common thread has been the question of how to live out its faith as an organization. This journey has led to the adoption of "integral mission." While Freeman views integral mission as the organization's attempt to combine "evangelism and development into one integrated activity" (156), Tearfund understands it in this way:

Mission is more than just verbal evangelism plus social action. It does not just bring two types of missional activity together. Rather mission is our participation in God's mission to redeem and restore the world, seeking the kingdom and its justice in all spheres of life. In our mission we take Jesus Christ as our example, understanding that his incarnation reveals the Father's love, justice and kingdom to us in every aspect of his life and ministry - in his words, his deeds and his character. We also believe that by becoming a part of the Body of Christ and being shaped by this relationship we learn how to follow in his footsteps and participate in the mission of God. (Tearfund 2016)

In other words, integral mission should lead to a focus on "being," from which all "doing" flows, and on a move away from a body-spirit dualism that categorizes activities as either "material" or "spiritual." Through the lens of integral mission, it is not possible to isolate activities from the beliefs and motivations that underpin them. Indeed, Tearfund's participation in God's mission to seek justice in all spheres of life might result in the organization carrying out the same activities as so-called secular organizations, since from this perspective working to enable communities to access clean water is not simply a social or material action, but one that is deeply spiritual (c.f. 139). While the outsider perspective is valuable, deeper interaction between the outsider and insider perspectives would have strengthened the analysis within the book.

One of the questions that Freeman sets out to address concerns whether and how Tearfund's faith impacts its practice. Yet what is distinctive about Tearfund's practice is the nature of the questions underlying its decision-making, which are rooted in its faith. It is this continual, faith-based questioning and wrestling that has brought into being those aspects of the organization's work that Freeman has assessed as innovative, while at the same time enabling it to continue carrying out aspects she would label "secular." It is faith that has enabled the organization to hold those two supposedly contradictory elements of its work in tension - although this has not always been easy.

The critique is but minor, for this is a well-written book and an excellent addition to the literature within the field. One of its main contributions lies in the questions it raises, both for Tearfund and for other FBOs. It also brings a challenge to the academic community in relation to the focus of its research on FBDOs; as Freeman notes, academia needs to be more in tune with their reality. She writes: “As the detailed historical and contextual analysis of this book has shown, many of the questions and assumptions of this literature have little to do with the reality of actual faith-based development organizations” (163).

Tearfund was born out of evangelical Christian roots, with faith being part of its DNA from the start. As an organization it has continued to grapple with what it means to be a biblically and Christ-centered organization. To assume that there is an end goal to the quest, as the title would imply, is misleading. Tearfund’s journey has seen global and local expressions and outworkings of faith with churches, partners and networks. If the organization had not, and does not continue to grapple with its faith identity, then it could risk becoming irrelevant in a dynamic and ever-changing world. Tearfund’s difference lies in its ability to sit in the gap between mission and development; and for that it must continue to learn, grow, and adapt.

References

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