
Spiritual Metrics as a Bulwark Against Secularization

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One of the problems that Christian relief, development, and advocacy organizations wrestle with is how to ensure that their programs are holistic in terms of integrating the spiritual with the material. This article explores how and why being intentional about including spiritual metrics into our planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes holds great promise to enable that integration to be done well, and to guard against the “secularization” of those efforts.

Introduction

The integration of faith with development efforts is an age-old challenge among Christian relief, development, and advocacy organizations in terms of how exactly to go about doing so. One of the recurring problems is that there is a tendency to separate out the spiritual into its own category in such efforts, even as organizations remain committed to integration. With the increasing interest in spiritual metrics, defined as measuring the spiritual impact of programs, this issue continues to come to the fore. At the Accord Research Alliance (ARA) pre-conference intensive (ARA) in October of last year (2022), Jayakumar Christian brought up this issue head-on, stating several times in his keynote presentation that we should not “slice off” the spiritual from everything else and try to measure it, because in so doing we would be buying into and propagating the perspective that you can and should separate the spiritual from the non-spiritual. “All economics is spiritual, all politics is spiritual,” Jayakumar said, going on to insist that we need to approach and deal with all things as such.

To many who are deeply interested in and committed to ensuring a holistic approach to their relief, development, and advocacy efforts, and who thus take spiritual dimensions seriously, including planning for and measuring the spiritual impact of their programs, this statement created uncertainty, confusion, discomfort, and concern among listeners, and for several reasons. At the very least, this statement seems to throw into question the means and methods they were and are currently undertaking to bolster and fortify these integrative efforts; at the most, it seemed to posit that these efforts in and of themselves were sorely misguided and even potentially harmful.

Given these concerns, it seems wise to explore in more depth exactly what Jayakumar Christian was saying, especially its programmatic implications around spiritual metrics. This brief reflection seeks to begin to do that and set the stage for a follow up conversation with Jayakumar and others in the symposium that occurred on May 4, 2023. The root argument in this reflection is that it seems to me that what Jayakumar was warning against was succumbing to or even perhaps unwittingly nourishing the danger of a “spiritual/secular” dualism in our attempts to measure the spiritual, a warning that is always timely and important because the danger is constantly present. Let me explain why, if done well, spiritual metrics actually create a bulwark against the threat of the spiritual/secular division.

Definitions and Foundational Observations

Let’s start with definitions of the “spiritual” and the “secular” to ensure we are all on the same page in terms of our language and terms. One dictionary definition of the “spiritual” is “relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things,” or “relating to religion or religious belief,” whereas a dictionary definition for “secular” is “denoting attitudes, activities, or other things that have no religious or spiritual basis” (both taken from Oxford Languages English Dictionary through Google). It is important to make two foundational observations here. First, both of these definitions point to the importance of understanding the spiritual and the secular as concepts that fundamentally revolve around a relationship with the divine: the first embraces it and the latter rejects it, denying that such a relationship exists, either because there are aspects of life where the divine is not relevant

or present, or because the divine simply does not exist. For Christians, on the other hand, we believe all things are under the lordship of Christ, that he relates to, is present in, and governs all things, at all times (Colossians 1:15-20), whether we are aware of it or not, or, as Jayakumar said, not only are economics and politics spiritual, all things are!

Underpinning Theological Foundations

Now consider what it means for us, as we carry out our lives and work, that Christ relates to, is present in, and governs all things. A good place to start is with the theological insistence that there are four main relationships we should pay attention to: our relationship(s) with God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), with ourselves, with each other, and with creation. If we look at these through the lens of the spiritual and the sacred, two things jump out. First, there is no question that in the first of these relationships, our relationship with God, the “spiritual” element is constantly present. As we seek to know God better and draw closer to God, we are inherently engaging “the spiritual,” and there is no danger of losing that from view. Second, this is not the case with the other three relationships. Rather, when we engage in relationships with ourselves, each other, and/or with creation, whether it be through economics, politics, or the environment, there is a strong tendency for us, especially in the West, to push God out of the picture, to “secularize” things, to relate to each other and to creation without relating to God in the process, or without having God present. Many of the forces pushing in this direction have found their greatest strength in the Enlightenment and its legacies, a theme that can be explored later. Suffice it to say that this secularization, this “despiritualization,” is exactly what Satan constantly strives to bring about, and against which we must always be on guard, as Jayakumar so helpfully challenged us to be. Two related questions immediately arise: first, how do we prevent such a secularization in our programs from happening? Second, how do we intentionally strive to deepen the spiritual dimensions and spiritual impacts of our programs?

The Role of Spiritual Metrics

To my mind, spiritual metrics provides answers to both of these questions, because the planning, implementation, and evaluation efforts geared towards measuring the spiritual dimensions do three things; (1) they help bring the spiritual dimension back in where it has been lost; (2) they strengthen it where it is weak; and (3) they create a bulwark against efforts to downplay it, because as it is integrated with the other dimensions. In other words, rather than slicing off the spiritual and putting it into its own category, spiritual metrics help

graft spiritual dimensions back into situations where they are absent and nurture and deepen those spiritual dimensions where they are already present.

Spiritual metrics do this, or can do this, in two ways. First, intentionally including spiritual metrics forces everyone involved in planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating to wrestle with exactly how what they are doing is spiritual, thereby deepening the awareness and understanding of the presence of God in all they do. Second, it requires us to think and pray about what increasing levels of spiritual maturity might look like, and how best to pursue those outcomes as part and parcel of our programs and projects. It is important to remember that spiritual maturity has to do, as we saw above, with the deepening of relationships of people with God, with themselves, with each other, and with creation in the context of God’s lordship and will for all of these; therefore spiritual metrics will consider what people understand and believe and how they act and feel, in terms of their thoughts, words, deeds, and emotions towards God, each other, and creation as they engage with the economic, the political, and all the other important areas of life. The key question then becomes how to integrate planning for and evaluation of the spiritual side of things into our programs and projects. Let me offer a few thoughts.

Making it Concrete: Some Examples

First, I suspect we have all seen what “secularized” development programs look like, both in secular development organizations, but truth be told, also in Christian ones. To wit, agricultural projects become solely about increasing crop yields; health projects become solely about increasing physical and psychosocial wellbeing; education projects become solely about increasing educational attainment; microfinance programs become solely about increasing income; WASH projects become solely about how many wells are drilled, water projects established, latrines built; advocacy and empowerment projects become solely about increasing the power and leverage of the oppressed and the opportunities and rights they can obtain. In all of these, the spiritual dimension disappears, or at the very least is severely truncated, sliced off from the planning, implementation, and evaluation of these projects.

What would it look like to use spiritual metrics to encourage spirituality to be reincorporated and nurtured into these programs and projects? As I have said elsewhere (Bronkema 2024), the best way starts with discussions around planning rather than with discussions about measurement, because planning for spiritual impact forces us to be intentional about incorporating the spiritual in our activities. I am skeptical of using universal spiritual outcome indicators

precisely for that reason: not only do they generally not fit the particular contextual needs, but also truncate the collective organizational and participatory process of discussing how the spiritual is and should be manifested in all that is done, which in and of itself creates that bulwark against secularization that I mentioned above. As a result, I recommend a three-step process for spiritual metrics: first, organizations and the people they work with should think and pray about what spiritual outcomes they hope to achieve along with the material ones; second, they must ensure that activities are actually geared toward bringing these about; and third, only after engaging in steps one and two, they should decide what the appropriate measurement indicators should be. Of course, this can and should be an iterative process, incorporating insights from the implementation experience in a cycle of action/prayerful reflection/action. In my experience, this approach seems to bear the best fruit. Also, it is always good to start on a small scale.

Concluding Thoughts

Jayakumar's warning against slicing off the spiritual to measure it is a good reminder of the overall dangers of secularization. But this assumes the spiritual dimension is already front and center in people's minds, thoughts, and plans as they carry out their projects. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. In fact, most reports seem to indicate the despiritualizing presence and process is extremely powerful in our programs. As a result, it is absolutely essential to tackle this head on. Being intentional about integrating spiritual metrics into our planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes holds great promise to enable us to do that well.

References

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