



**SMC**

FAITH IN DEVELOPMENT

Anyone who wants to contribute to change in the world needs to understand the role of religion. The world is religious, and the vast majority of people derive guidance and identity from some form of religion. The importance of religion also seems to be increasing in most countries in the world.

## The role of religion

For most people in the world, religion, social life, economics, and politics are intertwined. Religious actors and traditions thus have great significance for how people act in political, social, or economic matters. We believe that what governs people's decisions; what is desirable or not desirable, and what people experience as good or bad, is a result of the narratives people allow to shape their identity. Understanding the role of these, often religious narratives, is essential to understanding events in the world around us. Without this understanding, which we call religious literacy, you are in the risk of misinterpreting the world around you.

## Requires conscious training

Religious organisations are strong actors in international development cooperation. Many of these organisations strive to use both a rights-based language and a religious language to describe their motivations and objectives. Over time, the religious language has often been toned down, in the belief that a secular language is more compatible with a professional stance. This happens both in the global south and the global north and has a negative impact on the ability to analyse one's context and to build trust between people. If religious language is toned down in the conversation between religious actors, the conversation and the work will lose several dimensions.

Therefore, building religious literacy is both a challenge and an opportunity for religious and secular organisations equally. It will improve any organisation's ability to understand processes in the social or political spheres.

To become religiously literate requires a conscious strategy. To acknowledge competence in religion as a professional strength, not a burden, is a part of this process.

## This is how SMC defines religious literacy

- 1 The ability to understand the ways in which religion and belief influence a society and its development.
- 2 The ability to recognize religion and belief as explanatory factors without reducing or overstating their importance.
- 3 The ability to analyse the ways in which religion and belief interact with other factors in specific contexts.

## Did you know that...

- 80-90 percent of the world's population identifies with a religion?
- People in low- and middle-income countries have more trust in religious leaders than in political one?
- About 7 percent of all land in the world is owned by religious organisations?
- Half of all schools in the world are run by religious institutions?
- After the 2004 tsunami, communities that regained their religious meeting places recovered more quickly?

# Practice religious literacy

- Religions are complex and dynamic. Within each religious tradition, there is a wide range of values and teachings. Religions are constantly changing through interaction with their surroundings. Knowledge of a particular context needs constant renewal.
- The values of religious organisations may differ from the "usual" ones that deal with - right-left, liberal-conservative, etc. Understanding the complexity of this requires practical religious literacy for those seeking cooperation with religious actors.
- Because religious actors reach large population groups, many want to use them as a channel for their own goals, instead of engaging with them as actors with their own values and goals. Religious literacy is a step towards avoiding this kind of instrumentalisation.
- Religious actors may express scepticism towards rights-based language. At the same time, the basic content of human rights is expressed within most religious traditions. Religious literacy is required to find an interface between religious language and rights-based language.
- Religion can be a sensitive subject. Colleagues and employees may have both positive and negative experiences of religion, experiences they may not want to share. It is important to see religious literacy as a professional skill that does not have to be linked to one's own experience of faith or religion, although these can be an asset.
- Within development cooperation, there has been a tendency to see a secular outlook on life as normative and a religious attitude as something incomplete and transitory. Religious literacy challenges and problematises that perspective.
- By analysing the degree to and how the right to freedom of religion or belief is respected, you avoid misjudging the space available for individuals and religious actors to discuss a given issue.

## Learn more

### **smc.global**

Educational materials and links on religious literacy and freedom of religion and belief.

### **fabo.org**

On-demand training courses on religious literacy, religion and development, and Freedom of Religion or Belief.

### **partner-religion-development.org**

International Network of Civil Society, States and Intergovernmental Organisations.

### **forb-learning.org**

Educational resources on Freedom of Religion or Belief

## SMC Faith in Development

SMC gathers 29 Swedish based churches and organisations that work on a Christian basis for the equality of all people all over the world. It is a meeting place for ecumenical cooperation among different Christian traditions with a particular focus on mission, global development and the role of religion in society.

SMC is a part of the Knowledge Forum for Religion and Development, in which we work together with Act Church of Sweden, Diakonia, Islamic Relief Sweden and PMU, to promote increased religious literacy and increased understanding of the role of religious actors in international development cooperation.

## Contact

Petter Jakobsson, Theological advisor  
+46 8 453 68 88, [petter.jakobsson@smc.global](mailto:petter.jakobsson@smc.global)