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## Religious Organizations

Julia Berger  
Department of Religious Studies, University of  
Kent, Canterbury, Kent, UK

### Synonyms

[Faith-based organizations](#); [Faith-inspired organizations](#); [Religious nongovernmental organizations \(RNGOs\)](#)

### Definition

Religious organizations are organizations whose identity and mission are derived from a religious or spiritual tradition and which operate as registered or unregistered, nonprofit, voluntary entities.

### Introduction

Religious organizations are among the oldest associations: Sufi and Catholic orders, and Buddhist Sanghas, carried the teachings and practices of their respective faiths across diverse regions long before the notion of “religion” came to signify a separate domain within human life. Today, despite predictions that modernity would push religion to the margins, religious communities

continue to grow and to exert a major influence on society. The Pew Forum on Religion, in its 2012 study of global religious demographics, reported 2.2 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims, one billion Hindus, nearly 500 million Buddhists (7 %), and 14 million Jews around the world as of 2010 (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012). (Over 400 million people practice folk or traditional religions, 58 million belong to other religions, and 1.1 billion do not identify with a particular faith, although they may hold religious or spiritual beliefs.)

It is impossible to say how many religious organizations are in existence, in part because of the challenge of defining what constitutes a “religious” organization and, in part, because many organizations are not formally registered. For the purposes of this article, “religious organizations” are defined as organizations whose identity and mission are derived from a religious or spiritual tradition and which operate as registered or unregistered, nonprofit, voluntary entities. According to some estimates, there are millions of religious organizations active all over the world – ranging from the smallest, local unregistered groups to professional organizations with billion-dollar budgets and a transnational infrastructure.

In this complex organizational universe, it is possible to distinguish among different types of organizations, such as: (a) authoritative and representative organizations (e.g., Vatican), (b) charitable and development organizations

(e.g., Salvation Army), (c) sociopolitical organizations and movements (e.g., Organization for Islamic Cooperation), (d) missionary organizations, and (e) illegal and/or violent organizations. (Clarke et al. 2008). While religious organizations have generally been associated with the provision of social services and humanitarian relief, in the past several decades, they have increasingly injected their voices into the domains of advocacy, policy, and decision-making at the highest levels. Issues of particular concern have included: the rights of women, social and sustainable development, conflict resolution and peace, migration inequality, and freedom of religion, to name a few. The blurring of the divide between religion and politics has challenged long-held assumptions about the place of religion in the public sphere and raised awareness of the varieties of “church-state” arrangements that give rise to different roles of religious organizations throughout the world.

### **The Changing Role of Religion in the Modern World**

The study of religious entities in contemporary society has been largely shaped by the “secularization theory,” which predicted that as societies modernize, religion will lose its ability to influence thought and behavior and will be limited to the private sphere. Yet, rather than retreating into irrelevance, religious organizations, institutions, and movements have asserted their presence at all levels of society. In the domain of politics, movements such as the Iran Revolution of 1979, the Catholic Church’s support of the Polish “Solidarity” movement, the rise of the Christian Right in the USA, and the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center have challenged commonly held notions of the role of religion and its influence in the modern world. The theory of secularization, now considered a poor guide to contemporary affairs, has also been contextualized in terms of its European and Christian roots. There is greater recognition that different historical trajectories, such as those in Hindu, Confucian, or Muslim societies, have produced diverse

concepts of “religion” and “modernity.” These, in turn, have given rise to different varieties of religious organizations, institutions, and movements.

Today, the salience of religion and religious organizations in the public sphere is plainly evident. This includes their reach and influence in domestic and international affairs, in development and humanitarian aid, and the provision of social services. It also includes the rising tide of extremism, radicalism, and violence committed in the name of religion. A number of facilitating factors have supported the proliferation of religious organizations. The decline of communism and the end of the Cold War revitalized civil society and gave rise to the emergence of new kinds of identities and modalities for collective action; in the USA, the Christian Right gained strength in the 1970s and became increasingly influential in shaping domestic and foreign policy; the United Nations global conferences of the 1990s galvanized religious actors and organizations (as well as secular ones) and set the stage for the emergence of transnational civil society; mounting moral outrage at the growing levels of inequality and poverty worldwide spurred religious organizations to action; and, in the face of weak and corrupt administrations, religious organizations scaled up their long-standing tradition of providing humanitarian aid and social services. In addition, globalization and communication technology have greatly facilitated coordination and advocacy efforts and made it easier for both peaceful as well as violent groups to organize. Today, eight out of ten people identify with a religious or spiritual tradition. Increasing membership in organized religious groups has also led to a growing number of resources being channeled to religious organizations.

Changes within religious communities themselves have also shaped the nature of religions’ engagement with society. The Second Vatican Council, from 1962 to 1965 (“Vatican II”), which addressed relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the modern world is one such example. It was a central factor in the development of Liberation Theology in Latin American and spurred the Church to engage more actively in

public debates on war, peace, human rights, and other social justice issues. *Gaudium et Spes* (“The Church in the Modern World”), a seminal document produced by the Council, gave specific recommendations regarding the nature of the Church’s engagement in the life of society. Vatican II also prompted the creation of new Catholic organizations that would take up the call to realize the mission of the Church in the modern world.

## Defining Religious Organizations

The task of defining a “religious” organization is an elusive one; there is no single agreed-upon definition of “religion.” For the purposes of this entry, religious organizations are defined as organizations whose identity and mission are derived from a religious or spiritual tradition and which operate as registered or unregistered, nonprofit, voluntary organizations (Berger 2003). Millions of organizations around the world could be included in this category, including: the Vatican, a local chapter of the Salvation Army, a Muslim school, a Hindu political party, a Jewish advocacy organization, and the like. Included in this category are also organizations that prefer the designation “spiritual” and/or “movement” rather than “religious,” such as the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual Movement (a female-led movement, founded in India). As there are no universally accepted objective parameters for defining a religious organization, the self-identity of the organization serves as a useful guide.

The decision as to whether an organization is “religious” can have significant practical and legal implications for fundraising efforts, tax status, and public perception. The difficulty and consequences of designating an organization as “religious” are illustrated by the protracted conflict between the Church of Scientology and the United States Internal Revenue Service (IRS). For decades, the IRS sought to determine whether the Church of Scientology and its affiliates constituted a “church” and satisfied the criteria for tax exemption as a “religious” organization. IRS criteria included: existence of a

religious doctrine, religious literature and history, ordination of ministers, and a religious community. In 1993, the IRS finally granted tax-exempt status to the organization and its 150 affiliated churches, missions, and social welfare organizations. Attention must also be given to the entity formulating the definition (e.g., government body, academia, development agency, religious institution) and what purpose such a definition serves (e.g., qualification for tax exemption, legitimacy, etc.).

Commonly used terms used to describe religious organizations of various kinds include: faith-based organizations, faith-inspired organizations, and religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The term “faith-based organization” is commonly used as it is considered more inclusive entities that do not affiliate with a particular religion (e.g., World Peace Prayer Society). The term is also more inclusive of humanitarian and relief-focused organizations while the “NGO” designation tends to imply more direct engagement with advocacy and policy processes. Terminology also varies in different contexts; for example, “religious NGO” is the used term by the United Nations, while “faith-based organization” is typically used by national governments and development agencies.

From a global perspective, it is also important to consider that the term “religious” organization comes out of a particular philosophical stance, which draws a dividing line between the religious and secular dimensions of human life. As this is not a universal philosophy or way of understanding and organizing society, it may be that an organization which appears to be “religious” from the perspective of one observer may not be labeled as such by its members.

## Typologies of Religious Organizations

Given the tremendous diversity of religious organizations – in terms of religion, resources, membership, mission, geographic spread, etc. – it is helpful to organize these according to a typology. The following typology draws on

categories proposed by various authors e.g., Clarke et al. (2008); Marshall (2013):

(a) *Authoritative and representative organizations*

Organizations in this category have an authoritative status within their respected religious community. They rule on doctrinal matters and represent religions in their engagement with the state other representative actors. Examples include: the Vatican, the Buddhist Sangha, the Anglican Communion, the Imamate of the Ismaili community, and the Universal House of the Justice of the Bahá'í community. Many of these structures extend from the local to the global and tend to be hierarchically organized. However, many religious traditions are decentralized with no single body authorized to speak on its behalf (e.g., Muslim, Hindu communities). These organizations may also include global interreligious or ecumenical bodies such as Religions for Peace, Parliament of the World's Religions, and the World Council of Churches.

(b) *Charitable and development organizations*

These include funding or managing programs that engage in what can be broadly called "development" and social justice. These organizations provide social services, such as education, health care, nutrition, humanitarian relief, etc. – particularly in the absence of functioning domestic entities. Examples include: American Friends Service Committee, Salvation Army, Care International, Caritas International, Christian Aid, Church World Service, Islamic Relief, Lutheran World Federation, Musawah, and World Vision International. They range from international structures to informal, unregistered organizations at the community level.

(c) *Sociopolitical organizations and movements*

This is a highly diverse group, which includes political parties, social movements, and cultural organizations. Organizations in this

category include: religious organizations ("NGOs") active at the United Nations, the European Union, and the World Bank; political parties (e.g., Hindutva, a Hindu nationalist party in India; Shas, an ultra-orthodox Jewish party in Israel), and the Organization for Islamic Cooperation. Social movements in this category include the Community of Sant'Egidio, Opus Dei, and Ahmadiyya, among others.

(d) *Missionary organizations*

These organizations actively promote the teachings and worldview of their respective religion and may also engage in charitable work. Examples include: Campus Crusade for Christ and Youth with a Mission.

(e) *Radical, illegal, or violent organizations*

Groups in this category generally promote and/or engage in militant and violent acts justified on religious grounds. While such groups exist within most if not all religious communities, in the past several decades, many have used the teachings of the Qur'an to justify their actions (e.g., Al Qaeda, Hamas, ISIS (or "Daesh"), Jemaah Islamiyah, Muslim Brotherhood).

Other religious organizations not captured in this typology include unregistered community and congregation-level groups such as women's and youth groups, which may be among the most widespread religious organizations. Religiously linked academic institutions, such as Union Theological Seminary, Hebrew Union College, and Al-Azhar University, that train future religious leaders and scholars, are also a type of religious organization. The above categories need not be seen as discrete as some religious organizations may straddle more than one category.

Given the tremendous diversity of religious organizations, this entry focuses primarily on types (b) and (c): charitable and development organizations and sociopolitical organizations and movements.

## **Religious Organizations in the Field of International Development and Advocacy**

Until recently, religious organizations in the field of development were largely ignored in academic and public policy circles. The notion of development was closely associated with concepts of “modernity” and “secularization” and, as such, deemed religion as irrelevant and harmful at best. In addition, most development agencies worked predominantly with governments as it was expected that governments would play a primary role. Yet long before the concept of “development” assumed such prominent status in the international community, missionary ventures and religiously inspired initiatives were at the forefront of providing essential social services to underprivileged and marginalized populations in many parts of the world. In 1947, the Nobel Peace Prize was jointly awarded to two Quaker organizations – the Friends Service Committee in London and the American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia – for humanitarian service and dedication to peace. Since the 1980s, the combined impact of globalization and the failure of many secular development approaches (e.g., structural adjustment programs, market deregulation, “trickle down” economics) to improve social and economic well-being have spurred the search for more holistic approaches to development – those that take into account the cultural, social, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of individuals and communities. And it is often to religious organizations that attention has turned.

Today, religious development organizations command major financial and human resources. World Vision International, for example, reported operating revenue of one billion dollars in 2015; Catholic Relief Services had revenues of over \$721 million (2012); London-based Islamic Relief had \$116 million (£82.8 million) in 2013; and Lutheran World Relief had \$47,296,491 in 2014. An increasing number of (secular)

international development agencies and Western governments have entered into formal partnerships with religious organizations recognizing their particular strengths – such as resources, the trust of local communities, and extensive geographic reach. Since the 1990s, religious organizations have become increasingly visible on the global stage: the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, which took place in the United Nations General Assembly Hall in 2000, signaled (if only symbolically) an evolving relationship between religious communities and the nations of the world.

While it is impossible to account for all of the contributions made by faith-based and religious organizations, the following estimates provide a sense of the scope of their engagement. The World Health Organization, for example, estimates that 30–70 % of the healthcare infrastructure across the African continent is owned or run by FBOs, with percentages varying within this range in different countries. (The first census in Africa on the not-for-profit healthcare sector conducted by Uganda in 2001, for example, showed that 70 % of all private not-for-profit health facilities in Uganda are owned by autonomous diocese and parishes.) Further, a 2007 study found that over 50 % of health and education programs in sub-Saharan Africa were implemented by FBOs. Between 2001 and 2005, over \$1.5 billion was channeled through faith-based organizations by the US International Development Agency. In the USA, the Catholic Church is the largest nonpublic provider of human services to families living in poverty.

Recognizing this critical role, a growing number of partnerships are being established between intergovernmental and domestic governments and religious organizations, signaling a “new normal” in terms of government-religion relations. These include: formal partnerships between religious/faith-based organizations and UN agencies (e.g., United Nations Population Fund, UNICEF, UNAIDS), the World Bank (e.g., “The Moral and Spiritual Imperative to End Extreme Poverty”

initiative), multi-stakeholder partnerships (e.g., International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development), and national governments (e.g., United States Agency for International Development, United Kingdom Agency for International Development, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, etc.).

It is not only in the field of social services and humanitarian relief that religious organizations are playing a major role, they are also adding their voices to policy debates at national and international levels. Organizations such as the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the American Jewish Committee, the Muslim Canadian Congress, and the Asian Muslim Action Network are among organizations whose mission involves a strong advocacy component.

A major example of this kind of advocacy can be seen among the religious organizations active at the United Nations. Religious organizations have engaged with the UN since the founding of the organization. The relationship is guided by Article 71 of the UN Charter which states that the UN's Economic and Social Council "may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations, which are concerned with matters within its competence" and that such arrangements may be made with international organizations and, where appropriate, with national entities. Today over 4,000 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are formally accredited to the UN through the Economic and Social Council. Of these, approximately 400 are religious organizations, as reported by the organizations themselves. The "consultative status" with the UN grants organizations access to UN deliberations (though not all) and UN conferences, allowing them to make oral and written interventions and, in some cases, to make recommendations for items to be included on the UN's agenda. The concerted, and at times disruptive, lobbying efforts of religious organizations at major UN conferences, such as the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo) and the 1995 International Conference on Women (Beijing) brought to light a much more visible and active role that NGOs

would play in shaping international policy and human rights.

In 2000, the UN launched a global research strategy, called the "Millennium Development Goals" (MDGs), which attracted the support of many religious organizations throughout the world. The nations of the world had committed to eradicating poverty by 2015 and to achieving eight goals centered on the eradication of poverty, achievement of universal primary education, promotion of gender equality, maternal health, reduction of child mortality, combating major diseases, environmental sustainability, and international development cooperation. Religions for Peace (formerly, "World Conference of Religions for Peace"), a global interfaith NGO in consultative status with the UN, produced a report titled "Faith in Action: Working Towards the Millennium Development Goals" to provide religious organizations and leaders with the tools to carry out advocacy campaigns to support the achievement of the MDGs (Religions for Peace 2007). Many UN-affiliated international religious organizations as well as countless national and local religious organizations supported efforts to achieve the goals, in particular goals related to education and health. In 2015, the UN launched "Agenda 2030" – an international development agenda to succeed the MDGs and one more ambitious and universal in its scope. The UN and the World Bank have made explicit the key role that religious organizations play and will need to play in order to meet the goals of equity, prosperity, sustainability, and peace by 2030. To review lessons learned from the FBO-UN partnership, the UN has since created an Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging with Faith Based organizations for Sustainable Development to exchange and build knowledge about outreach and collaboration with religious entities.

### **Religious, Organizational, and Strategic Dimensions of Religious Organizations**

Figure 1 provides a table outlining the religious, organizational, and strategic dimensions of religious organizations. Rather than looking at

Religious, organizational, and strategic dimensions of religious organizations

<i>Religious dimensions</i>		<i>Organizational dimensions</i>	<i>Strategic dimensions</i>
<i>Self-identity</i>	<i>Mission</i>	<i>Structure</i>	<i>Approach/ methods</i>
Bahá'í	Framing	Unitary Corporate	Advocacy/ lobbying
Buddhist	Focus	Federated	Awareness raising
Christian	Humanitarian relief	Confederated	Capacity building
Hindu	Legal reform	Autonomous	Coalition building
Muslim	Social service		Coercion/ violence
Spiritual	Propagation of religion	<i>Representation</i>	Dialogue
Interfaith	Social transformation	Religious	Knowledge building
Other	Other	Denominational	Monitoring
	Beneficiaries	Ecumenical	Modeling
<i>Pervasiveness</i>		Spiritual	Moral suasion
Organizational identity		Interfaith	Protest
Decision-making		Geographic	Prayer/ spiritual guidance
Membership		Political	
Resources		<i>Resources</i>	
		Membership dues	
<i>Relationship to religious leadership</i>		Tithing	
Subordinate		Donations	
Cooperative		Grants	
Independent		Public funding	
Oppositional			
		<i>Geographic Range</i>	
		Community	
		Sub-national	
		National	
		Regional	
		Transnational	

**Religious Organizations, Fig. 1** Religious, organizational, and strategic dimensions of religious organizations (Adapted from Berger 2003).

religious organizations as monolithic entities, this framework permits a closer look at the various dimensions of an organization’s operation. While it can be adapted to most religious organizations, it is most relevant for charitable, development, and sociopolitical organizations.

**Religious Dimensions**

Prior to the recognition of “religious organizations” as a distinct field of organizations, in the early 2000s, organizations were predominantly classified according to their mission or strategic focus. Categories included: environmental, human rights, women’s rights, development, and humanitarian relief organizations, among others. While this is one way to map a complex universe of organizations, it doesn’t capture the distinct qualities of organizations, whose identity and mission are shaped by religious or spiritual convictions. The framework examines this dimension by looking at four variables: self-identity,

pervasiveness (of religious influence), relationship to religious leadership, and mission.

The **religious self-identity** of an organization confers a number of distinct advantages to the organization, which can be thought of “religious” resources that assist the organization to carry out its mission. These include the spiritual and moral values that guide the work of the organization, such as the Jewish principle of *tikkun olam*, the Muslim principles of *zakat* and *waqf*, the principles of “engaged Buddhism,” the Bahá’í principle of building capacity to contribute to the betterment of the world, the Christian principles of charity, etc.). The long history of religious communities throughout the world also translates into greater demographic and geographic of religious organizations as compared to their secular counterparts. Where religious communities are fully integrated into the life of a particular population, or have provided essential social, spiritual, and cultural resources for a long period of time, relationships of trust have formed. These are seen as

among the most valuable assets that religious organizations bring to the table as potential partners in international development efforts – religious organizations provide “access” to populations through their long-standing physical and cultural presence in communities and their ability to appeal to the depths of human motivation. When addressing cultural practices such as child marriage, female genital cutting, or the education of girls, development agencies have found that they must work first at the level of community beliefs and attitudes in order for projects to be meaningful and sustained.

Other “religious” resources include the ability to mobilize adherents on the basis of moral imperatives, access to national and international organizational networks of religious institutions and believers, access to financial resources of the respective religious institution and its adherents, as well as tax-exempt status. Religious organizations and communities, by virtue of their traditions of tithing and sharing of one’s wealth, are able to generate financial resources that often rival, and exceed, those of international development organizations.

A further religious dimension is an organization’s **relationship with the authoritative religious institution/body** of the respective religious tradition. We can distinguish between four different types of relationships: subordinate, cooperative, independent, or oppositional. Roman Catholic religious orders, for example, are arranged in congregations, but are not necessarily under the direct authority of the Catholic Church. As such, we might think of them in terms of having a “cooperative” or “independent” relationship with religious authority. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops falls under the authority of the Vatican and as such can be considered as having a “subordinate” relationship to its religious leadership. The Muslim advocacy organization, Musawah, whose work challenges many authoritative interpretations of Islamic scripture, would fall under the category of “independent” or “oppositional.” Many Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist organizations – associated with decentralized traditions – could be categorized as “independent.”

While religious and secular organizations often work toward the same ends, e.g., humanitarian relief, social justice, etc., their **motivation** is articulated in different terms. Religious and faith-based organizations are animated by a worldview, which is rooted in a belief in the transcendent. For some, this worldview is rooted in a belief in “God”; for nontheistic organizations (such as Buddhist or Hindu organizations), this may be described as “dharma” or in reference to “Brahman.” A worldview oriented toward the transcendent gives rise to a particular way of seeing the world, of understanding one’s role in the world (in particular in the face of oppression and injustice), and of carrying out that role in the world. Such a worldview often imposes a sense of personal “duty” and responsibility on adherents vis-à-vis their fellow man. It is this sense of duty that is expressed in the work and mission of many religious organizations. The language of the sacred writings of various religious and spiritual traditions has for thousands of years been interpreted and used by believers as a source of motivation, as a call to sacrifice one’s comfort and wealth for a higher cause, a call to work for justice, and to endeavor to realize the vision conveyed in the scriptures. (It is important to acknowledge that the philosophical/ ideological roots of much of transnational social movement activism are, in fact, religious. They are rooted in early missionary work, and motivated by the religious convictions of the founders of respective movements.)

The **pervasiveness** of the religious dimension refers to the extent to which religious affiliation defines the organization’s identity, decision-making, membership, and resource base. This category sheds light on the idea that there are no purely “secular” or “religious” organizations and that religious identity and religious resources are articulated and deployed differently depending on the organization.

The fourth religious dimension is the organization’s **mission**. It concerns not only the tangible outputs of the organization but also the meaning attached to that “output” by the members of the organization. The mission might encompass: humanitarian (or emergency) relief, social

services (e.g., health care, education), mobilization of opinion, education/awareness raising, or missionary work, among others. Yet looking only at the observable behavior or “output” of a religious organization, one is likely to miss the religious dimension (with the exception of missionary work). What renders the work “religious” (or spiritual) is the particular worldview, which inspires, informs, and shapes the work as a whole. While some religious organizations focus on the propagation of their religious beliefs, most give expression to these beliefs through the tangible work performed in the name of a social good.

Below are excerpts from mission and vision statements from major development and social justice organizations, as conveyed on their respective websites. (See Fig. 2.)

Yet another dimension concerns **beneficiaries**, as differentiated between members (or adherents of the religious organization) and external target groups.

It is important to note that the variables in the “religious dimensions” category of the framework may not be discernible in the visible actions of the organization. The relief and humanitarian work done by religious and secular organizations often looks the same. In fact, in recent years, it has been acknowledged that the divide between religious and secular organizations is becoming increasingly blurred. What remains significant however is that without an understanding of this internal dimension of religious organizations, it is not possible to fully understand the rationale and significance of their engagement in society.

### Organizational Dimensions

The organizational dimensions of religious organizations – structure, representation, resources, and geographic range – in many ways, resemble those of their secular counterparts. Structure refers to the degree of centralization of authority among RNGO offices; representation refers to the constituents on whose behalf the organization claims to speak; resources refer to the source of financing; and geographic range assesses the physical spread of the organization’s affiliates (as measured by an official presence in a given locality). Together, these dimensions begin

to reveal the complexity and diversity of the ways in which religious entities organize themselves for action.

**Representation** is a particularly salient issue for advocacy-focused organizations as a large membership base coupled with the support of an authoritative religious institution confers much needed legitimacy and moral authority to the mission and work of the organization. Given that religious and spiritual teachings lend themselves to different interpretations – often leading to major divisions within religious communities – a claim to represent an entire religious community or a denomination can be controversial. A challenge facing religious communities is ideological divides, which can result in clashes between “liberal” and “conservative” believers. This comes into stark relief in the area of women’s sexual health and reproductive rights: organizations affiliated with the same religious tradition may take very divergent views on this topic (e.g., Catholic for Free Choice and Center for Family and Human Life). Religious organizations define their membership according to a broad spectrum of parameters. The Lutheran World Federation, for example, states that it is “a global communion of 145 churches. . . representing over 72 million Christians”; “the Union for Reform Judaism represents 2.2 million Jews across 873 congregations.” Other religious organizations frame this issue differently. Muslims for Progressive Values describes itself as striving to “embody and be an effective voice of the traditional Qur’anic ideals of human dignity, egalitarianism, compassion and social justice.”

The question of **resources** plays a major role in determining the character and agenda of an organization. Many religious organizations are privately funded, with a substantial portion of financial resources coming from members in the form of donations, dues, or tithes. Some religious organizations, such as the Baha’i International Community, accept funds only from members of the respective religious community. At the other end of the spectrum, Catholic Charities – the largest network of independent social service organizations in the USA – receives as much as two thirds of its funding from the federal government.

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 Excerpts from mission statements of selected religious organizations
 

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*Bahá'í International Community*

"All human beings "have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization," according to the sacred scriptures of the Baha'i Faith. The notion that every nation, community, and person has a part to play in building a peaceful and prosperous global society is central to the work of the Baha'i International Community's offices."

*Brahma Kumaris*

"A worldwide family of individuals from all walks of life, we are committed to spiritual growth and personal transformation, believing them essential in creating a peaceful and just world. Acknowledging the challenges of rapid global change, we nurture the well-being of the entire human family by promoting spiritual understanding, leadership with integrity and elevated actions towards a better world."

*Islamic Relief Services*

"Islamic Relief USA provides relief and development in a dignified manner regardless of gender, race, or religion, and works to empower individuals in their communities and give them a voice in the world. We remain guided by the timeless values and teachings provided by the revelations contained within the Qur'an and prophetic example."

*Religions for Peace*

Through *Religions for Peace*, diverse religious communities discern "deeply held and widely shared" moral concerns, such as transforming violent conflict, promoting just and harmonious societies, advancing human development and protecting the earth. *Religions for Peace* translates these shared moral concerns into concrete multi-religious action.

*Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism*

"Inspired by the words of the prophets in our sacred texts and profound commitment to *tikkun olam*, the Religious Action Center aims to bring a uniquely Jewish progressive voice to the national conversations shaping social justice and public policy in America."

*Soka Gakkai International*

"We, the constituent organizations and members of the Soka Gakkai International embrace the fundamental aim and mission of contributing to peace, culture and education based on the philosophy and ideals of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin."

*World YWCA*

"The World YWCA is based on faith in God the Almighty, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Its vision is of a fully inclusive world where justice, peace, health, human dignity, freedom and care for the environment are promoted and sustained by women's leadership. Towards this end, the World YWCA advocates and supports volunteerism, membership, diversity, tolerance, mutual respect, integrity and responsible accountability."

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**Religious Organizations, Fig. 2** Excerpts from mission statements of selected religious organizations

The policy of Western donors toward religious organizations has generally been restricted by constitutional conventions on the separation of church and state. Yet the rapidly changing place of religion at all levels of society, including in the domain of international relations, has strained conventional approaches and forced donors to rethink the criteria for effective allocation of resources. Today, religious organizations channel significant financial resources from Western donors to countries in the "developing" world. In addition to securing donor resources, they are able to mobilize large volumes of resources from among their adherents.

Most advocacy-focused religious organizations that seek to influence government policy

are particularly cautious to accept government funds. In many cases, reliance on public funding can affect an organization's posture toward government policy (which they may be challenging) and may have negative repercussions for its reputation and efficacy.

The **geographic range** of an organization examines the physical presence of the organization, as determined by an official presence in a given locality. Some religious organizations have a presence in over 100 countries (e.g., World Vision, Bahá'í International Community, others); others are active on a more local or national level. There is a tremendous diversity of **organizational structures** across religious organizations including diocese, congress, union, league, association,

etc. To organize these diverse configurations, the framework distinguishes between structures based on the degree of centralization/ decentralization of decision-making power. It provides a four-part typology including: unitary corporate (e.g., Habitat for Humanity), federation (e.g., Lutheran World Federation), and confederation (e.g., World Jewish Congress). Many Jewish organizations and those representing Catholic religious orders can be characterized by a loose central coordinating structure. Aside from religious differences, the choice of organizational structure may be justified in purely practical terms. Centralized structures, which tend to be the most efficient in terms of decision-making and resource-allocation, may be better suited to advocacy and relief-oriented missions while more flexible autonomous structures are adopted by RNGOs with a predominantly social service or spiritual guidance dimension.

### Strategic Dimensions

Religious organizations use a variety of **approaches** to achieve their aims. Many of these are common across and religious and secular (predominantly social justice) organizations: advocacy/ lobbying, awareness raising, capacity building, coalition building, dialogue, knowledge building, monitoring (following issues of interest, such as government actions, in an informed manner), modeling, moral suasion, and protest. While prayer may be part of a strategy used by religious organizations, individuals working in secular organizations may also do it privately. The highly networked structure of religious communities lends strength to many strategies of religious organizations as efforts can efficiently be scaled up using the existing physical, social, and communications infrastructure.

A discussion of approaches taken by religious organizations would not be complete without reference to violent and coercive means employed by radical and extremist organizations. Research about terrorism and violence committed in the name of religion quickly proliferated since the attacks on the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001. In the past decade, media attention has focused on extremist organizations

citing religious scriptures to justify barbaric and hateful crimes. Examples include Boko Haram, ISIS or ISIL, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Aum Shinrikyo (split in 2007), among many others. The ongoing challenge in containing religiously motivated violence is that those committing the violence believe it to be sanctioned by divine mandate. Such a belief has shown to have tremendous potency, especially when coupled with a sense of pride (individually and collectively), a supporting religious community, and a culture of violence.

### Emerging Issues and Challenges

The landscape of religious organizations continues to evolve as religious voices seek to assert themselves in the modern world. While typically associated with service provision and humanitarian relief, religious organizations have entered political arenas and policy debates to challenge dominant paradigms of development and progress and to question the integrity of the prevailing social and economic order. In addition, the tremendous movement of populations, domestic and international, voluntary and forced, is rapidly changing the demographics of communities and bringing diverse belief systems into greater contact with each other – further impacting the landscape of religious organizations. In the current social and political climate, a number of issues and challenges are of particular significance to religious organizations. These include: the rise of fundamentalist and extremist groups and movements, gender equality, misperceptions and misunderstandings between religious and secular groups, and religious freedom.

In the past decade, the landscape of religious organizations has been increasingly complicated by the rise of **religious extremism and fundamentalism**. New movements and groups have exploited political fragilities and have instrumentalized religion to promote extremism, exclusion, and violence. These new and emerging actors make use of religious and social discourses to foment social divisions, thereby undermining peace and security both domestically and globally.

Many religious organizations have become engaged in activities countering violence extremism by promoting intercultural and interfaith understanding and denouncing extremist, hateful, and misogynist interpretations of religious doctrine. The participation of religious organizations in these efforts is particularly important in conflict areas and fragile states in order to integrate the voice of the faith community in dialogue and peace processes.

Religious organizations are also facing rising criticism for their failure to engage with the structural and systemic barriers to **gender equality**. Despite their long history of service delivery and humanitarian relief, religious organizations have operated largely within existing cultural frameworks, without acknowledging the deep influence of patriarchal norms associated with many religious communities, institutions, and practices. Religious teachings continued to be interpreted (largely by men) and used to justify discrimination and violence against women and girls. The absence of women in positions of authority in religious traditions often excludes their voices from the interpretation of religious teachings. Today, issues of gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, and rights are among the most contentious in the entire development agenda – leading to deep ideological divisions between secular and religious organizations. The resulting perception of a fundamental incompatibility between religion and human rights has often discouraged engagement with religious organizations. Yet, today, a growing number of feminist religious organizations are leading the way in reexamining religious laws and advocating for women's rightful participation in the interpretation of religious doctrine (e.g., Sisters in Islam, Musawah).

The lack of **religious literacy** among the general population, and within the development community, poses a challenge to effective collaboration with religious organizations. There is a tendency to treat religious organizations as monolithic, failing to note the internal diversity of religious views and perspectives, and the influences of culture, politics, and individual personalities on religious organizations. While this

diversity significantly complicates the map of religious organizations, it also serves as a reminder that very few religious organizations represent the views of an entire body of believers, and that generalizations across entire religious traditions are often impossible and misleading. A further element of religious literacy is the understanding of the role that religion plays in people's lives. For many years, development and progress had been conceived in material and technical terms – as captured, shorthand, by a nation's GDP, for example. It took many years to understand the key social roles that religious organizations played in the lives of the majority of the world's people – they were among the most trusted social institutions, particularly where government infrastructure was weak and where the majority of social services were provided by religious organizations.

Perceptions of religion and religious organizations in secular society remain clouded in **suspicion**. Religious organizations are often perceived to be divisive, exclusionary, and political – competing for followers and contributing to existing social tensions. They are seen as being supportive of traditional patriarchal structures that conflict with universal human rights. The suspicion goes both ways: religious organizations may fear that international organizations and donor agencies may try to use them to further already defined policies. Having been long excluded from policy and decision-making concerning development, the rapid rise in interest in partnering with religious organizations is interpreted by some as opportunistic and potentially exploitative. As such, much work needs to be done to foster more informed and transparent collaboration.

Further suspicion is driven by concerns about **proselytization** agendas and activities of religious organizations. Many religious organizations have addressed this concern by becoming signatories to "The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief." As of March 2016, over 600 organizations (religious and secular) have signed the Code of Conduct, which states that, "Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint," and

that “We will not tie the promise, delivery or distribution of assistance to the embracing or acceptance of a particular political or religious creed.”

In addition, given the norm of “**church-state**” **separation** throughout the Western world, there is hesitation to engage with religious organizations in a way that may be perceived as violating this norm. Yet, at the same time, it is important to understand the cultural and historical specificity of this type of “church-state” relationship; it is not an idea native to other parts of the world, Asia in particular. In each country, the nature and function of the religious organization is shaped by the country’s constitutional relationship between the religion and the state. This relationship ranges from clear separation, where religious organizations and institutions are private (e.g., the USA, France), to full integration, where religious institutions are “established” by the government (e.g., Iran, Pakistan). The religion-state relationship shapes the legal and cultural norms, which either give rise to support or inhibit the formation of religious organizations. In countries such as India, the relationship is characterized by pluralist accommodation where the government supports the operation of a variety of religious organizations – both charitable and politically oriented entities.

From the perspective of international law, the baseline for countries is to uphold the universal **right to freedom of religion or belief**, which provides for the freedom to hold, and change religious beliefs, and to express those beliefs individually and collectively. This is a significant issue for religious organizations given that approximately 70 % of the world’s population lives under the rule of governments that place restrictions on this right.

## Conclusion

The role of religion in modern society continues to evolve. For much of modern history, scholars assumed that as countries modernized, the influence of religious institutions and values would decline and cease to be relevant in the public

sphere. Yet the secularization thesis, as it was known, largely ignored historical trajectories outside of the European experience and did not foresee the resurgence of religious voices and influential religious leaders, organizations, and movements. The geopolitical, social, and economic environment of the past 50 years has given rise to a religious agency, which among other things has found expression in a host of different kinds of religious organizations, seeking to give new expression to the vision and beliefs of their respective faiths.

The universe of religious organizations is highly diverse and complex encompassing small community-based unregistered religious groups working on specific issues such as maternal health or community farming, as well as transnational billion-dollar organizations with professionalized staff and offices in over 100 countries. Seen from one perspective these organizations appear very much like their secular counterparts, with concerns about executing on a mission, carrying out work in the name of the common good, securing resources, and the like. Yet there are important differences that come with a religious identity and religious affiliation. Religious organizations, by virtue of their identity, can tap into vast networks of spiritual, social, financial resources, and motivational resources.

The of religious organizations role in society is not uncomplicated. There is much anxiety and concern among secular organizations and institutions that the presence of religious organizations serves to foment conflicts and ideological divides. The rise of extremist and fundamentalist organizations has exposed the dangerous mix of vested political interests and ideology veiled in religious terms. Other challenges include religious organizations’ stance on gender equality and their lack of engagement with structural and systemic aspects of gender inequality. At the same time, greater religious literacy is needed to distinguish and better understand the nature of different religious organizations. Since much of what we know about religious organization comes from our understanding of Christian entities operating in Europe and North America, religious literacy will also need to expand to encompass religious and

spiritual organizations rooted in different cultural, political, and religious contexts.

### Cross-References

- ▶ [Civil Society Organizations](#)
- ▶ [Community-based Non-profit Organizations](#)
- ▶ [Culture and Development](#)
- ▶ [Ethics and Religion](#)
- ▶ [Global Civil Society](#)
- ▶ [Global Ethics](#)
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- ▶ [God, Science and Organizations](#)
- ▶ [International Nonprofit Organizations](#)
- ▶ [Leadership and Religion, Mission, Vision and Organizational Values](#)
- ▶ [Local Church as Social Action](#)
- ▶ [Religion and Nonprofit Organizations](#)
- ▶ [Spiritual Leadership](#)

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