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A MATTER OF FAITH? COMBATTING HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THAILAND AND CAMBODIA

EBA

A matter of faith?
Combatting human trafficking in Thailand and Cambodia

Andreas Henriksson

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to
The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA)

Andreas Henriksson defended his thesis “A matter of faith? Combatting human trafficking in Thailand & Cambodia” in 2024 at the Department of Political Science, Umeå University, Sweden. His research focuses on how faith-based organizations contribute to anti-trafficking efforts and how faith shapes their work compared to secular actors. Besides his doctoral research, he has extensive experience of development work in both Asia and Africa, in different capacities.

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Sammanfattning

Människohandel är ett globalt fenomen som uppskattas drabba över 49 miljoner människor världen över. Denna rapport sammanfattar en avhandling från 2024 med titeln "A matter of faith? Combatting human trafficking in Thailand & Cambodia". Avhandlingen undersöker hur kristna hjälporganisationer arbetar mot människohandel i Thailand och Kambodja, vad som formar deras strategier och hur deras arbete uppfattas lokalt. Resultaten visar att organisationerna främst prioriterar post-traumatiskt stöd för överlevare av människohandel, med betoning på traumabearbetning samt moralisk och andlig återuppbyggnad. Detta innebär ofta individualiserade och förandliga lösningar som riskerar att tränga undan strukturella förändringsansatser. På så sätt deltar dessa kristna hjälporganisationer i styrning där fokus förskjuts mot individuellt ansvar med betoning på immateriella värden.

Organisationernas religiösa världsbild, särskilt uttryckt som idéer om "holistisk utveckling", formar deras strategier, liksom relationer till andra aktörer. Dominerande sekulära normer inom arbetet mot människohandel leder till att religion och religiös identitet tonas ned. Inom trosbaserade givarnätverk är det dock fortsatt möjligt för kristna organisationer att lyfta fram religionens roll för identitet och i arbetet mot människohandel.

Studien visar att de kristna organisationerna ofta framgångsrikt överbryggar religiösa skillnader i buddhistiska sammanhang på lokal nivå genom tillitsbyggande, översättning av idéer och samägarskap med lokala aktörer. Organisationer med mer nedtonad kristen identitet har även lättare att samarbeta med sekulära aktörer. Sammantaget visar avhandlingen att religiös tro påverkar hur arbetet mot människohandel utformas, genomförs och tas emot, men att detta inflytande är starkt kontextberoende.

Abstract

Human trafficking is a widespread human rights violation affecting approximately 49 million people globally, with all countries involved as sources, transit points, or destinations. This Development Dissertation Brief (DBB) is a summary of my dissertation from 2024 with the title "A matter of faith? Combatting human trafficking in Thailand & Cambodia". The thesis examines how faith-based organizations (FBOs), specifically three Christian organizations in Thailand and Cambodia, contribute to anti-trafficking efforts and how faith shapes their work compared to secular actors. The findings show that FBOs' anti-trafficking work is characterized by a strong focus on post-trauma interventions, such as trauma healing and vocational training, and on individual spiritual and moral transformation. This reflects a religious worldview that aligns their work with therapeutic governance, emphasizing individual responsibility and immaterial wellbeing. FBOs are also distinguished by their funding structures, relying mainly on faith-based donor networks rather than mainstream development donors.

While secular norms often encourage them to downplay their religious identity in partnerships with secular actors, faith-based funding enables them to openly use religion as a motivator for change. Importantly, religious differences do not hinder the implementation of FBO programs in predominantly Buddhist communities. Instead, religion often functions as a resource for building trust and co-ownership with local actors. By contrast, collaboration with secular anti-trafficking actors is more challenging, as the religious–secular divide proves more significant than the Christian–Buddhist one.

Overall, the thesis demonstrates that faith significantly influences the design, implementation, and reception of anti-trafficking initiatives, though its impact is highly context-dependent and shaped by cultural norms, values, and material conditions.

1 Background and rationale

This Development Dissertation Brief (DDB) is a summary of my dissertation "A matter of faith? Combatting human trafficking in Thailand & Cambodia" (2024). My research has examined the role and impact of faith in antitrafficking through a study of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in Thailand and Cambodia. Human trafficking is a widespread human rights violation affecting approximately 49 million people globally, with all countries involved as sources, transit points, or destinations (Walk Free Foundation 2023). While human trafficking is understood in different ways, The UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol defines trafficking as the recruitment, transport, or receipt of persons through force, fraud, or deception for the purpose of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, and organ removal (UNODC 2006). South-East Asia, particularly the Greater Mekong Subregion, has become a key trafficking hub, with Thailand and Cambodia identified as hotspots (Davy 2013; UNODC 2020). As a result, the region has attracted significant anti-trafficking interventions (Limoncelli 2016; Molland 2012).

While human trafficking and antitrafficking have been widely studied—from law enforcement and policy responses to border control and service provision (Avdan 2012; Eun-hye and Elizabeth Heger 2015; Foot et al. 2019; Hu 2019; Kaur 2010; Kranrattanasuit 2014; Leser and Pates 2019; Lobasz 2009; Limoncelli 2016; Szablewska and Kubacki 2018)—the role of faith-based organizations remains underexplored. Existing research offers only fragmented insights, despite evidence of their extensive involvement in antitrafficking efforts (Feingold 2014; Frame 2017, 2019; Frame et al. 2019; Lonergan et al. 2020; Shih 2014).

Antitrafficking is part of the development agenda (Molland 2011), and religious actors and FBOs are prevalent and active within international development cooperation. In some instances FBOs are even dominating the field (Clarke and

Ware 2015). Some FBOs are global in scope (Haugen 2019; Occhipinti 2015), while the vast majority of them are small and tend to fall below the radar of development cooperation policy debates (Schnable 2015, 2016, 2021; Smith 2017). Faith-based organizations are estimated to make up a considerable share of the antitrafficking NGOs in the Mekong region (Frame 2019; Lonergan et al. 2020) and are thus important to study when attempting to understand antitrafficking efforts. Understanding FBOs in antitrafficking therefore contributes to a broader understanding of religious actors in a fragmented development cooperation landscape within a South-East Asian context.

1.1 Human trafficking and antitrafficking in Greater Mekong Sub-Region

South-East Asia, and particularly the Greater Mekong Subregion (including southern China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam), has become a hub for human trafficking. In this subregion, Thailand and Cambodia host large numbers of internal and international economic migrants due to porous borders, relative economic prosperity, and political stability (Davy 2013; UNODC 2020). Globalization and digital communication have facilitated connections between supply and demand, creating conditions that particularly affect women from Asia (Samarasinghe 2003). In the Greater Mekong Subregion, trafficking for sexual exploitation is common (UNODC 2020). After years of rising numbers, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported a slight decline in detected trafficking victims in 2022, mainly driven by decreases in low- and middle-income countries (UNODC 2022).

In Cambodia, scholars link the rise of modern trafficking to the institutional collapse following the 1990s civil conflict, which severely limited access to education and livelihoods (Davy 2013). While sex trafficking has received most attention, Cambodians are exploited across multiple sectors, including fishing, construction, agriculture, and manufacturing, both domestically and abroad. In

Thailand, approximately 40% of Cambodia's 1.5 million migrant workers are considered at high risk due to insecure immigration status, and forced labor—particularly in fishing—remains widespread (Molland 2019; Nonnenmacher 2014; USDS 2019). Cambodia has faced sustained pressure from the US and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to strengthen its antitrafficking response, with corruption cited as a major obstacle (Davy 2013; USDS 2019).

Thailand has a long history of slavery, debt bondage, and human trafficking, as well as sustained antitrafficking efforts (Davy 2013). The expansion of the sex industry during the Vietnam War, combined with globalization, population growth, and economic inequality, contributed to conditions enabling exploitation (Bales 2000; Davy 2013). Human trafficking in Thailand is often described as network-based rather than controlled by centralized criminal groups, with corruption undermining enforcement efforts (Blackburn et al. 2010; Davy 2013; USDS 2019). Thailand functions as a source, transit, and destination country, with migrant workers and minorities particularly vulnerable due to weak labor protections and insecure legal status (USDS 2019). Trafficking occurs across several sectors beyond the sex industry, including fishing, agriculture, manufacturing, construction, and domestic work (Jones et al. 2018; Nonnenmacher 2014; USDS 2019).

Both Thailand and Cambodia have adopted national antitrafficking policies and designated ministries to coordinate responses (Thai Government 2022).[1] Regionally, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has initiated joint antitrafficking efforts, although it lacks common norms for addressing the issue (Kranrattanasuit 2014). Antitrafficking efforts are largely implemented through international development cooperation in both countries, often alongside broader initiatives such as education and livelihood support (Molland

[1] Interviews with NGO representative, 3 and 5.

2011). Antitrafficking is also embedded in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly goals on gender equality (5), decent work (8), reduced inequalities (10), and peace, justice, and strong institutions (16).[2]

[2] https://sdgs.un.org/goals

2 Research aim and questions

Previous research on antitrafficking faith-based organizations has been fragmented, and there has been a lack of a comprehensive, coherent and multidimensional understanding of the role of faith in the antitrafficking work of faith-based organizations. Studying the antitrafficking work of FBOs is important because of the extensive presence of variations of FBOs engaging in the field, because of their potential contributions as antitrafficking actors and, more importantly, because of the lack of systematic academic attention to their antitrafficking activities. Thus, my research has contributed to increased knowledge about Christian FBOs as actors, about their strategies for antitrafficking, and about dynamics of cooperation and negotiation in global and local civil society. I have not evaluated the effectiveness of the FBOs' antitrafficking operations, an undertaking which future research should focus on.

Thailand and Cambodia are two countries where human trafficking is prevalent, and where there is a significant concentration of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and FBOs operating against human trafficking (Foot et al. 2015; Limoncelli 2016). Studying these contexts may also generate insights that have wider relevance beyond the region, and beyond the field of antitrafficking specifically, such as the broader development agenda.

My thesis has addressed the following research questions:

1. What are faith-based organizations doing to counter human trafficking and what characteristics do their strategies have?
2. What shapes the design of faith-based antitrafficking strategies?
3. How is the work against human trafficking by the faith-based organizations received by local communities in Cambodia and Thailand?

3 Methodology

My thesis was a case study of three Christian antitrafficking faith-based organizations in Thailand and Cambodia. Since FBOs are estimated to make up a considerable share of the antitrafficking NGOs in the Mekong region, and among these many are Christian (Frame 2017; Henriksson 2024b; Pinkston 2019). This makes them both relevant and important to research.

To gain access to relevant antitrafficking FBOs, I was introduced to the local networks in Thailand and Cambodia of Interact (Evangeliska Frikyrkan, EFK) and Eriks Development Partner (Erikshjälpen). The studied organizations were all small or medium-sized Christian FBOs engaged in antitrafficking work. One organization works widely across Cambodia, while the two other FBOs have their antitrafficking operations in one city or in one province. Two of the FBOs had antitrafficking as the core of their mission while one of the FBOs had antitrafficking as one of several objectives. The three FBOs differ in terms of which role faith takes in the organizations and operations, where one can be categorized as faith-permeated, one as faith-centred and the third as faith-affiliated (using categories developed by Sider and Unruh 2004).[3]

The organizations are staffed by local (Thai or Cambodian nationals) but one of the organizations have some Western volunteers and are also led by Americans. All three organizations have been established by Western individuals or organizations. One of the FBOs focus its activities in areas that serve as a source for trafficking victims. The second FBO addresses source, transit as well

[3] ***Faith affiliated*** organizations have ties to religious communities and make implicit and explicit reference to faith, but religious activities are limited and optional. ***Faith centered*** organizations explicitly identify with a religious entity, include religious references in their mandate, and may apply religious criteria for staff, while religious activities remain optional. ***Faith permeated*** organizations place faith at the core of their work, require religious criteria for staff and leadership, and organize regular religious practices for staff.

as destination areas. The third FBO is active at destination locations. A summary of the profile of the studied FBOs is provided in the table below.

In my research, I used various methods of enquiry such as individual interviews, group discussions, relationship mapping, observations, document reviews and website content analysis. The type of respondents included 23 beneficiaries and community members, FBO activists, staff and leaders, representatives of antitrafficking NGOs, government officials and donor representatives.

Table 1. Faith-based organizations studied

Case	Objective	Type of FBO	Ex-patriates	Est.	Budget
FBO1	Community development, including anti-trafficking	Faith-centered Protestant Christian	None	Late 1990s	USD 600,000
FBO2	Anti-trafficking	Faith-affiliated Protestant Christian	Few, mainly in leadership	Mid 2000s	USD 1,300,000
FBO3	Anti-trafficking	Faith-permeated Protestant Christian	Few, mainly in leadership	Mid 2000s	USD 500,000

Source: Henriksson 2024a

I made use of a multidimensional analysis which captures FBO practices, how these are shaped by ideas and relationships, and how the work of FBOs is received in communities where they work. I do not attempt to assess the FBOs' effectiveness in countering human trafficking but instead seek an insiders' perspective on how the FBOs view their own social and political reality. The absence of any assessment of the FBOs' anti-trafficking work is a limitation, I welcome other researchers to explore. For the full description of the methodology, I refer to my dissertation (Henriksson 2024a).

4 Results and discussion

The results will be presented around the three research questions of the thesis. Under each section, a summary of main findings is presented. First, I will outline the context of South-East Asia in terms of antitrafficking response. This provides an important backdrop to the answers of the three research questions.

The antitrafficking field is layered, some organizations are well connected, well known and frequently get invited for consultations by the foreign Embassies.[4] There are many smaller organizations far away from the general policy and research conversations about best practice.[5] Antitrafficking organizations that are working at the local community level and that are known by other organizations are usually Christian organizations.[6]

FBOs are the dominant group of antitrafficking actors in both Cambodia and Thailand.[7] FBOs in antitrafficking make up a considerable part of the antitrafficking NGOs in South-East Asia (Frame 2017; Frame et al. 2019). The FBOs cooperate with authorities, local community-based organizations (CBOs), churches, Buddhist pagodas, the police, embassies and UN agencies. However, FBOs operate mostly at the local level.[8] There are many antitrafficking FBOs that are too small, or not connected enough, to be reached by discussions of international donors, researchers and policymakers.

In summary, South-East Asia has a concentration of antitrafficking NGOs, and many of these are in fact FBOs. Moreover, many of the antitrafficking actors,

[4] Interview with NGO representative, 1.
[5] Interview with NGO representative, 4 and 2.
[6] Interview with NGO representative, 4.
[7] Interviews with NGO representative, 2, 4 and 6.
[8] Interview with NGO representative, 4.

including the FBOs, are not connected to the policy debates of researchers and institutional donors.

4.1 What characterizes antitrafficking FBOs in South-East Asia?

My main overall findings are:

- FBOs emphasises the spiritual aspects of antitrafficking work, which stems from a multidimensional analysis of human needs.
- Given the spiritual emphasis, FBOs tend to emphasize post trauma phases of antitrafficking work, but also practices emphasizing building character, self-esteem and knowledge.
- The FBOs have distinct donor patterns which are dominated by churches, FBOs and individuals.
- FBOs avoid political and structural aspects of antitrafficking work which are not appealing to their donor networks.

Faith and religion are defining features of the antitrafficking work of faith-based organizations. The studied organizations emphasize that human needs are multidimensional, including spiritual dimensions (Henriksson 2024b, Freeman 2018). This holistic approach challenges the secular separation between spiritual, and material needs and recognizes religion as a potential resource for social change, even if the FBOs do not engage in proselytism[9], often referred to as religious literacy (Juul Petersen and Le Moigne 2016). Attempts at isolating religion in development in this context is not meaningful, and potentially harmful.

[9] Proselytism means engaging in spreading their own religious beliefs.

I find that the FBOs apply their faith in different ways depending on their level of faith infusion and donor base. Examples of how faith is applied is using religious concepts or theology in trauma therapy, prioritizing to work with faith leaders in change process, using prayer requests in fundraising, or including spiritual elements in staff retreats (Henriksson 2024b). The studied FBOs demonstrated strong respect for spirituality and the societal role of religious leaders—an approach rarely adopted by secular actors due to secular biases (as demonstrated by Ager and Ager 2011; Butcher and Hallward 2018; Dragovic 2017; Hallward 2008). The studied FBOs engaged with spiritual worldviews in relation to survivors of human trafficking, their own staff members, donors, community members or leaders from different faith traditions.

I find that many FBOs prioritize post-trauma and restoration-focused interventions, and particularly FBOs with more explicit faith identity. Such priorities reflect faith-based ideas of holistic development, where societal change is understood as emerging through personal transformation, including spiritual renewal (just as Freeman 2018 has identified). Practices such as trauma healing, rebuilding self-esteem, and moral formation are central. Some FBOs integrate spiritual components—such as devotions, mentoring, or Bible studies—into aftercare and vocational training, viewing employment as both restorative and therapeutic (Henriksson 2024b). These practices blur secular boundaries between religion and development and are often sustained through faith-based donor networks. It is overly simplistic to assume that the absence of institutional funding or secular actors would automatically erase the boundary between religion and development. However, recognizing religious values does not necessarily imply promoting an explicit Christian agenda.

FBOs with an explicit faith identity, particularly those reliant on churches and individual donors, have a complicated relationship with structural and political dimensions of antitrafficking work. Rather than challenging state policies, they collaborate with authorities through capacity building and service delivery,

thereby gaining mutual legitimacy. The FBOs focus on survivor-centred advocacy which includes navigating bureaucratic processes and, at times, pursuing compensation through state or legal mechanisms. Such advocacy is not viewed as political within faith-based networks and offers a way to address structural issues without alienating donors hesitant toward political engagement (Henriksson 2024c).

Donor relationships are central in shaping the antitrafficking practices of the FBOs (Henriksson 2024c). Unlike secular NGOs, FBOs rely heavily on individuals, churches, and other FBOs, granting access to extensive faith-based networks, including some of the world's largest international organizations (Haugen 2019). At the same time, increasing professionalization and concentration of institutional funding makes access difficult for small and medium-sized FBOs (Banks and Brockington 2020). On the ground, FBOs collaborate with a broad and diverse range of actors, including churches, NGOs, UN agencies, government bodies, businesses, and individuals. Donor composition varies by level of faith infusion where less pronounced faith means more diverse donor profile.

FBOs often rely on volunteers for program delivery, fundraising, and communication, particularly when supported by personal and church-based networks (Henriksson 2024c). While this is common among small organizations more broadly (as demonstrated by Schnable 2015, 2016, 2021; Tomalin 2012), FBOs leverage spiritual commitment to mobilize resources, access funding, offer lower salaries, and draw on volunteer labour (Davis 2019; Schnable 2015, 2016).

4.2 What shapes the response of antitrafficking FBOs?

My main overall findings are:

- Christian FBOs draw on ideas of "holistic development", which particularly includes spiritual aspects This in turn shapes the understanding of human trafficking and the response to it, which is foundational to a focus on religion and religious leaders as key stakeholders in a change process, as well as a focus on inner change of individuals.
- The antitrafficking work of FBOs is stemming from Evangelical privileged groups in Northern America. The influence of these groups is translated as individualistic ideologies emphasizing hard work and individual transformation.
- The secular-religious divide leads to "shy FBOs" where the faith-based identity is concealed and the FBOs engage with various strategies to deal with the role of faith and religion in antitrafficking. Again, the donor networks influence these choices.

These finding will be discussed in three separate sections, corresponding to the points above.

4.2.1 Holistic development

Evangelical, and many Protestant, denominations and affiliated FBOs have ideas that can be summarized in the concept of "holistic development" (Dotsey and Kumi 2019; Freeman 2018; Leer-Helgesen 2016, 2020). The worldview that underpins the idea of holistic development, adding spiritual human needs, is based on the doctrines of creation, fall and redemption. It assumes that the world and everything within it have been infused with evil and the ultimate resolution is found in redemption (Freeman 2018). This theology carries impli-

cations for their views on human trafficking, and what is seen as an appropriate response to human trafficking, elaborated below.

"Holistic development" is often used in contrast to "secular development". The emphasis on spiritual aspects leads to a focus on religion, and religious leaders as key stakeholders, considering different ways to activate religion as a force for change. In addition, the holistic development also leads to an understanding of human trafficking as a problem of troubled souls caused by emotional or spiritual trauma, or immorality. The emphasis on troubled souls individualizes the problem of human trafficking, but also internalizes it, placing the problem inside the spirituality, morality and psychology of human beings. Such practices can be criticized for victim blaming, but also for the tendency to neglect structural causes to human trafficking (Henriksson 2024c).

This view of human trafficking translates into antitrafficking practices that often focus on awareness raising, protection, improving self-esteem and existential health, because victims of human trafficking are perceived as troubled individuals. This spiritualized way of understanding human trafficking also makes the FBOs particularly well-placed to counter it, according to their own understanding (Henriksson 2024c). This kind of problem representation of human trafficking, and the practices that it produces, can be seen as a form of therapeutic governance, which is an analytical concept used to describe and explain certain forms of governing (Pupavac 2005).

4.2.2 Individualistic ideologies

Ideas shape the response to human trafficking. The theological interpretation of Christian Evangelical groups which pivots away from structural economic reform and ignores structural and racial injustice (as found by Reynolds and Offutt 2013; Williams 2020; Yukich and Edgell 2020). This kind of thinking can then be transferred to a human trafficking context, translated as individu-

alistic ideologies emphasizing hard work and individual transformation (Henriksson 2024c). Such ideas contribute to the FBOs' emphasis on entrepreneurship and vocational training, drawing on the dichotomy between dignified and undignified work. Sex work is perceived as undignified, even if the sex worker's pay is better, or the hours shorter, and any alternative employment is seen as dignified. This dichotomy is a result of Christian ideas on sexual morals (see for example Zimmerman 2011, 2013). The risk is that such ideas produce a dichotomy of "bad prostitutes" and "good victims" (as found by Alvarez and Alessi 2012) – echoing a view of "undeserving" and "deserving" poor (Katz 2013).

4.2.3 "Shy FBOs" and faith-based donor networks

The general secularist view of religion as a problem to avoid (Dragovic 2017; Hallward 2008) creates two tangible effects on faith-based organizations (FBOs). The first is the "shy" FBO, meaning that FBOs tend to adapt how they present their faith identity, and de-emphasize it in relation to critical (secular) audiences. FBOs are seen as less professional and thus, to be taken seriously, they need to present themselves using secular modes of communication. Lonergan and Tomalin calls this strategy a dual register (Lonergan et al. 2020). FBOs with higher degrees of faith infusion (Sider and Unruh 2004), can find it difficult to participate in certain forums where the secular development discourse is pervasive.

The second effect of secular actors' scepticism towards religion is on the type of donors that the FBOs have. FBOs tend to rely more heavily on individuals, churches and other FBOs, and less on institutional donors. Institutional donors prefer partners that express their faith in a more toned down way (Tomalin 2012). Broadly speaking, the antitrafficking FBOs and their donors are partly reflections of each other and therefore have impacts on the actual antitrafficking work.

One strategy used by the faith-affiliated FBO to resolve the tensions relating to faith in antitrafficking from a diverse donor network is to de-emphasize the faith identity and adopt an ambivalent stance towards faith in antitrafficking. Another strategy used by the faith-centred FBO is to emphasize the role of religious literacy and, drawing on religiously inspired values in society, to advocate for antitrafficking measures. The third strategy used by the faith-permeated FBO is to intertwine faith in antitrafficking work (Henriksson 2024c). This means that Christianity is an essential part of the work in the form of regular devotions for staff and clients, but also faith-based counselling for clients. Such antitrafficking practices are harder for secular donors to accept, something which makes it harder to attract secular donors, making the FBOs' donor portfolio less diversified and more faith based.

4.3 How is antitrafficking FBOs received in local communities in a South-East Asian context?

My main overall findings are:

- FBOs, despite various degrees in faith-infusion, all demonstrate effective abilities to work across religious, organizational, cultural and governmental divides.
- Despite differences in religious beliefs, Christian antitrafficking FBOs manage to create a co-ownership with local Buddhist communities in terms of what human trafficking is and how it should be countered. A shared religious ontology expediates this process.
- The divide between Christian FBOs and Buddhiust communities is easier to bridge than between (Western) secular actors and Christian FBOs.

Given the Buddhism is the majority religion in South-East Asia, a key question is whether Christian faith-based organizations (FBOs), whose core defining

feature is their faith identity, can operate there across a potential religious divide. My research shows that these Christian FBOs have complex and heterogeneous relationships in the communities: secular/Buddhist government ministries/departments, Muslim governments (from places of origin of trafficking victims), secular NGOs, health clinics, embassies, community-based groups, UN agencies, schools, private business owners and communities of various faiths. The point is that the religious divides do not necessarily hinder the FBOs from cooperating with a diverse group of actors (Henriksson 2025b).

A key puzzle in development studies is the power dynamics between donors, implementers and recipients. The issue of local ownership, how to achieve it, and why it matters, has been received intense research attention (see for example Black 2020; Brolin 2017; Hasselskog 2020; Hasselskog and Schierenbeck 2017; Kluczewska 2019). These questions also apply to the antitrafficking work of FBOs, and when they are engaging with actors and communities that are affiliated with a different faith tradition than their own, such as Buddhism. I find that the antitrafficking FBOs and local communities, as well as local authorities, align very well in terms of their understanding of human trafficking as a phenomenon, and what the main problems are in the community. They have co-ownership in defining the problem and solution (Henriksson 2025b). This does not mean that there are no imbalances in the power dynamics between implementors and recipients but rather points towards a more nuanced picture than an either/or scenario.

I argue that the FBOs are particularly skilled in adapting discourse, allowing for the FBOs to bridge cultural and religious divides and to find overlapping interests with local communities (Clarke and Ware 2017; Ware and Clarke 2017; Wimelius et al. 2020). They achieve this through active listening, building trust, persuasion, contextualization, translation and adaptation of ideas and concepts. They also manage to engage in several discursive practices simultaneously, including in religious discursive practices. I suggest that a shared religious ontol-

ogy between Christian FBOs and Buddhist local communities, despite differences in religious beliefs, expediates the process of creating co-ownership (Henriksson 2025b). These are examples of how religion enables development, and putting artificial boundaries around religion is counterproductive. In some ways, in the context of Thailand and Cambodia, the divide between Christians and Buddhists is easier to bridge than the divide between (Western) secular actors and FBOs.

5 Conclusion

This policy brief shows that faith does not have a uniformly positive or negative effect; rather, it matters because it shapes antitrafficking practices in multiple ways. Faith influences protection-oriented strategies, perceptions of trafficking and its solutions, funding dynamics, partnership patterns, and engagement with religious leaders. It can create tensions in a secular-dominated field while also opening opportunities for collaboration, such as co-ownership with Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia.

Even when faith appears to be a non-factor—such as when FBOs engage in activities similar to secular NGOs—it still shapes the contexts in which they can, are allowed to, or choose to operate. Similar dynamics likely apply to secular beliefs and to other religions, albeit with different effects. Additionally, the level of faith infusion matters, particularly in interactions with secular policymakers and donors. While the dimensions through which beliefs matter are broadly transferable, the specific effects identified here primarily apply to Protestant Christian FBOs.

The secular ideal of separating religion and development is more ambiguous than often assumed and reflects a Western construct that does not always align with other cultural or religious contexts. Isolating religion from culture and values is difficult. Although many FBOs support boundaries between religion and development, these boundaries are fluid, contested, and context dependent. This thesis highlights the diversity of perspectives on where such boundaries should be drawn, even among antitrafficking FBOs.

The findings also point to the importance of contextualized beliefs—religious ideas that are reinterpreted and combined with cultural, religious, or secular worldviews. FBOs strategically contextualize aspects of their faith to navigate partnerships, donor expectations, and secular development discourses. While

highly faith-infused organizations may maintain a strong religious identity, they also adapt their beliefs and practices to mobilize support and effect change. Finally, the thesis demonstrates that secular antitrafficking practices are not insulated from religious influence; instead, secular and religious ideas often intersect and reinforce one another, turning antitrafficking into a field shaped by multiple, interacting worldviews rather than a one-way movement toward secularization. This, too, happens in the context of antitrafficking in South-East Asia.

5.1 Key findings and policy recommendations

Donors and aid organizations should avoid too simplified boundaries for religion in development, because there seldom is a clear boundary as demonstrated in my research. Defining the boundaries for religion in development is difficult without considering the cultural context, and the context of the thematic field. Simplified boundaries are often derived from a secularist understanding in which religion is detached from culture and identity.

Donors and aid organizations should find ways of engaging with FBOs, religion and religious leaders. Religion will often be part of any problem as well as any solution in such contexts. In a context where religion and religious leaders are natural parts of life and community, FBOs - even though with a different faith than the surrounding community - might have better possibilities to succeed than secular NGOs.

Donors and secular aid organizations should identify ways where secular norms are exclusionary and attempt to make them more inclusive. While religion may be a possible obstacle to cooperation, it is also important to consider ways in which secularism is not inclusive as intended.

Donors and aid organizations should encourage dialogue and learning across secular-religious divide. Identifying spaces where such dialogue can take place

is crucial, and initiative for these dialogues should be taken by both secular donors and aid organizations as well as religious actors. By engaging in informed dialogue, secular as well as faith-based responses to development and antitrafficking can be improved and be more effective.

Donors and secular aid organizations should find ways to cooperate with FBOs and religious organizations, as this makes it possible to invite these actors for policy discussions. If FBOs are not engaged, it is difficult to influence such actors and achieve a coherent and coordinated response.

FBOs should strive to engage with secular donors without losing their religious literacy. This combination, at its best, can merge access to policy debates with relevant networks and effective means of change. Achieving this merging of worlds requires an openness to alternative assumptions, world views and prescriptions about faith, religion and society.

FBOs working in the field of antitrafficking need to balance their current emphasis on post-trauma and individual justice with addressing structural causes of human trafficking and thereby employ their full arsenal of tools against human trafficking. If FBOs stay connected with the broader antitrafficking field, discursively but also in terms of funding, this pivot will be expediated.

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This brief summarises research on how faith-based organisations in Thailand and Cambodia contribute to anti-trafficking efforts, often emphasizing trauma recovery and individual moral transformation. Their faith shapes practice, funding, and community engagement, often enabling trust and local co-ownership. The FBOs bridge religious divides, but collaboration with secular actors remains more challenging.

Denna rapport redogör för hur trosbaserade organisationer i Thailand och Kambodja arbetar mot människohandel, ofta med fokus på traumabearbetning och individuell moralisk förändring. Deras tro påverkar praktik, finansiering och relationer till andra aktörer, samt bidrar till förtroende och lokalt samägarskap. Organisationerna överbryggar religiösa skillnader, medan samarbete med sekulära aktörer är mer utmanande.

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