

# RELIGION IN THE DEVELOPMENT DEBATE RELEVANCE AND RATIONALE

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***Abstract:** This article considers the reasons why it is important to consider the role of religion in development. It shows that religious perspectives on development differ from the secular views that tend to dominate the development industry, focussing very largely on economic growth. Key development institutions are only slowly beginning to address this issue.*

## **Introduction**

Religion has become a rather contentious issue in public debates, notably because of political conflicts in which religion seems to play a prominent role, often a negative one. As one result, many secular people find it hard to think about religion in positive terms, as something that can help build human societies rather than contributing to their destruction. A secular aversion to religion is often also found among development agents. Yet, many of them also feel a need to look at the role of religion in the development process, even though such a need may be motivated by negative facts and feelings.

In the following I will suggest a number of reasons that require us to consider the religious factor in the development debate, which are not motivated by negative experiences or perceptions of religion. These are both of a practical and a theoretical nature. I will only mention those that I consider as most relevant.

## ***Why consider religion in the development debate?***

In many countries, notably in the non-Western world, religion is part of

the social fabric and is fully integrated with other dimensions of life. This is a simple social fact, but one that has important consequences for development cooperation. Until recently, the religious dimension of the lives of individuals and communities has been largely ignored in development cooperation, or even dismissed as irrelevant or harmful. This has in fact had a negative effect on development cooperation. As some observers have pointed out, many of the major flaws in the development process have arisen from a failure to relate to the metaphysical questions concerning human life, which provide the framework for any meaningful debate about the aims of development and how to understand and measure progress or the nature of the 'good life'.<sup>1</sup> Hence, there is an urgent need to understand other people's worldviews, as sustained development needs to be based on the cosmology of the people concerned.

The vast majority of people in the world are religious in some shape or form. Most of them are religious in the sense that they believe in the existence of an invisible world that is distinct but not separate from the visible world; a world that they believe to be inhabited by spiritual beings or forces with which they can communicate and interact, and which are deemed to have effective powers over their daily lives. For them, the spirit world contains power, spiritual power that can be employed to improve the quality of their life. For religious believers, spiritual power is 'enabling power.'<sup>2</sup> By interacting with a spirit world they get access to, and may share in, a form of power that can transform their lives. Spiritual empowerment, as we may call this process, also has certain consequences for the way in which many religious believers consider

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Tyndale, 'Towards sustainable development: A shift in values', *JUST Commentary*, vol. 1, no. 8, August 2001, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the use of this term by Allan Anderson, 'Pentecostal pneumatology and African power concepts: continuity or change?', *Missionalia*, vol. 1, 1991, pp. 65-74, notably p. 67.

development projects. The most important point in this respect is that they have a religious understanding of development that connects success and progress in the material world with spiritual growth and inner progress. For religious believers the invisible world is an integral part of the world as they know it, which is not reduced to its visible or material form only.

There are also other reasons for considering the role of religion in development. Religion, in whatever form it may manifest itself, and irrespective of whether secular policy-makers or development agents wish it or not, constitutes both a social and a political reality. The fact is that for many people in the world religion is a powerful motivation to act in the ways they do. Religion provides them with the moral guidance and inspiration to try and change their lives for the better. Moreover, it provides one of the major ways in which people choose to organise themselves. Many people voluntarily associate themselves with religious networks, which they use for a variety of purposes - social, political and economic - that go beyond the strictly religious aspect. All this is extremely relevant in the development debate.

But, in the end, the most important reason to pay serious attention to the religious dimension of people's life, in my view, lies in the need to maximise resources for development. Religious resources are an integral part of human resources. It is widely accepted in policy circles that any effective and lasting development should build on people's own resources. These include not only people's material and intellectual resources, but also their religious or spiritual ones. Religious resources, I have argued elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> are largely contained in four main elements that can be found in all religious traditions in the world, in different

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<sup>3</sup> Gerrie ter Haar, 'Religion: Source of conflict or resource for peace?', in Gerrie ter Haar and James J. Busuttill (eds.), *Bridge or Barrier: Religion, Violence and Visions for Peace*, Leiden: Brill, 2005, pp. 3-34, notably pp. 22-6.

constellations of importance: religious ideas (content of belief), religious practices (ritual behaviour), social organisation (religious community), and religious - or spiritual - experiences (psychic attitudes). These various dimensions of religion produce knowledge that in many cases can be - and often is - made beneficial to the community.

All these constitutive elements of religion can be explored, mobilised and utilised, not only by believers but also by others who may be motivated by secular ideals. So far, it is mainly the social organisation aspect of religion that has received due attention as an important resource for development, one which has been comparatively well explored. Cooperation between development agents and religious institutions and their communities is quite common, notably for service-delivery purposes. This is a very instrumental use of the religious factor in development that is increasingly met with reluctance by religious organisations in the developing world.<sup>4</sup> The constructive potential inherent in the other dimensions of religion is hardly considered by secular agents of development. Yet, there is neither a good reason nor a rational argument to leave out one important resource for human development if and when this is available. By the same token, there is no insurmountable divide between a spiritually-driven approach to development and the more material approach that Western institutions are familiar with, as recent studies demonstrate.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Religious and secular perspectives of development***

It is useful to take a critical look at the concept of development in this context, because religious believers have a religious understanding of

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. the report published by Cordaid, ICCO and the Institute of Social Studies of the conference 'Religion: A source for human rights and development cooperation', held in September 2005. The report was published in April 2006 (The Hague: BBO).

<sup>5</sup> See notably Katherine Marshall and Lucy Keough, *Mind, Heart and Soul in the Fight against Poverty*, Washington, D.C: The World Bank, 2004.

development, which connects success and progress in the material world with spiritual growth and inner progress. Many religious people believe that inner transformation is a necessary condition for social transformation and that without spiritual progress there can be no material progress.

The idea of development (as we know it) has a genealogy in Western-Christian religion. It can be seen as the secular translation of the belief that the kingdom of God, where all things will be perfect, will eventually arrive. The difference is that this future kingdom is no longer projected in heaven but that it is believed that such a utopia can be created on earth. Inherent in this thinking is the aspiration to eliminate evil in all its forms from the earth and the belief that human beings will - eventually - be able to achieve such a goal. This stands in rather sharp contrast with a religious worldview that recognises human imperfection and therefore generally accepts that life will not be perfect either. The real challenge in life is then to balance the powers of good and evil, in such a way that evil will not prevail.

Typical of much secular thought is also the belief in progress that is so characteristic of modern development theory. It equally reflects the Christian idea of humankind as pilgrims on the road to their final destination, where life will be as originally intended by its creator. In recent times, this religious notion of progress has become secularised and limited to material progress only. The idea that humankind is bound to progress on a way to a materially better world is central to the project of development. Development experts, as Denis Goulet already observed 25 years ago, appear to religious believers as 'one-eyed giants', who 'analyse, prescribe and act as if man could live by bread alone, as if human destiny could be stripped to its material dimensions alone.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Denis Goulet, 'Development experts: The one-eyed giants', *World Development*, vol. 8, nos. 7-8, (1980) pp. 481-9, at p. 481. Italics in original.

It is important to consider the theory and practice of development in the light of these observations. Progress is often understood by development agents in material terms only. Hence, development cooperation often pays too little attention to the spiritual road to development, which for religious believers is often at least as important as the goal that is desired. The Dutch development economist Bob Goudzwaard has identified a number of significant differences between secular and religious approaches in development cooperation, contrasting a mechanistic with an organic view of society. According to him, a secular worldview places its main emphasis on goals and objectives, while a religious worldview tends to emphasise the ways to achieve these. A secular approach stresses the role of the individual, while a religious approach is more likely to emphasise the importance of the community. Other significant contrasts between the two types of approach, in his opinion, concern an emphasis on competition versus an emphasis on cooperation, and the importance attached to the output of economic activities versus the importance attached to the input required.<sup>7</sup> The comparison shows that religiously inspired views of development are not primarily concerned with questions of economic development. The spiritual dimension precedes the material one, in the sense that from a religious viewpoint economic prosperity cannot be achieved without creating the spiritual conditions conducive to that goal.

In such a holistic perception of the world, it follows that people's social relations extend into the invisible world. That is, in the same way as they try and maintain good relations with their relatives, neighbours and friends for their own benefit, individuals and communities invest in their relations with spiritual entities to enhance the quality of their life. People all over the world enter into a variety of forms of active communication

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<sup>7</sup> Bob Goudzwaard, 'Religie en ontwikkelingssamenwerking: rem of impuls?' paper presented at a workshop on the role of religion in development processes, The Hague, February 2004.

with the spirit world in such a way that they derive information from it to further their material welfare or interests. Techniques for interacting with the invisible world may vary and also change over time, but the underlying idea remains the same: namely the belief that spiritual resources can be employed to sustain material life. Hence, religious traditions create their own dynamics, that may be - and are in fact - employed for what we might call development purposes. One example is the great variety of healing traditions in which methods are used that are based on an intimate knowledge of, and regular contact with, the invisible world. Spiritual technology, as we may call the elaboration of such methods, has a long history in human societies and continues to be practised in most of them. This technology aims at awakening and mobilising human faculties in reference to a spiritual world which people believe to be a source of real and effective power that they may use to improve their material life.

The question is: how can that potential be realised in development practice? There are no simple answers to that question, but one that is increasingly explored in development circles. Even such important financial institutions as the World Bank and IMF give more thought today to the religious or spiritual dimension of life in development. Since 1994, the World Bank has sponsored several international conferences on religion. At one such occasion, (former) World Bank President James Wolfensohn publicly stated that the central mission of the World Bank is 'to meld economic assistance with spiritual, ethical and moral development. On another occasion he has stated that human development must have regard for spiritual, ethical, environmental, cultural and social considerations, that religious communities would be allowed to influence World Bank thinking and had in fact already contributed much to development projects, and that governments and international agencies will be exhorted to join the search for a better

understanding between religion and development.<sup>8</sup> The call to take religion seriously in the development debate has now also been taken up in Europe, notably including the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, both by governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Development is inextricably tied up with politics, national and international. In particular, the separation of religion and politics is central to the secular outlook of development agents in the West. Obviously, a distinction between religion and politics can only be made by those who believe that these constitute fundamentally different spheres. This is not the case in most parts of the world where the concept of power brings the two realms together, material power on the one hand and spiritual power on the other. In that sense, what we see today is the non-Western world, especially, re-connecting with its own past in a variety of attempts to reintegrate spiritual power with material power.

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<sup>8</sup> The World Faiths and Development Dialogue, a small autonomous institution that brings together religious and secular perspectives on development, has resulted from these initiatives.