Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change
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Preface

This volume is based on the conference *Faith in Civil Society: Religious Actors as Drivers of Change*, held in Uppsala, Sweden, April 24-25, 2012. The conference was the third in a series of four yearly conferences, aiming to explore the formation of civil society internationally and its relation to democratisation and development. It forms part of the project *Outlook on Civil Society*, which is a cooperation between Uppsala Centre for Sustainable Development at Uppsala University, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation.¹

Over the past decades, civil society has been considered increasingly important to socio-economic development and in political mobilisation, perhaps especially so in developing countries. This is partly an effect of neo-liberal reforms that have decreased state responsibility in certain economic as well as political issues, instead increasing the role of not only private actors but also non-governmental organisations. Furthermore, the democracy reforms of the last decades and the heightened focus on human rights have strengthened the political agency of civil movements and organisations, which often have turned into driving critics of precisely the lack of democracy in governance. In an era of globalisation, non-governmental organisations, social movements, and other forms of civil organisations have extended their contacts across national borders, in a process promoting the creation of transnational civil networks. Many are the hopes that this vitalisation of civil society will strengthen societal development in a democratic direction, with increased popular participation.

*Outlook on Civil Society* aims at advancing the Swedish research front on civil society in developing countries, and at strengthening research-based knowledge about civil society among Swedish actors within international development cooperation. Furthermore, the project strives to be a bridge-builder between these two different spheres of expertise, and provide real possibilities for mutual exchange.
This third conference in our series focused on civil society actors constituted by religious associations and communities. Religious faith is a force by which people mobilise around shared identities with spiritual as well as political objectives, sometimes creating vast networks that extend beyond nation-state borders. The last decades, states have taken on an increased interest in religious associations, whether as a means to enforce shared values and objectives, to shoulder the task as service providers, or to counter terrorism. This interest is reflected as well in renewed attention within international development cooperation for religious associations. While this has given augmented recognition to the role of religious actors, it has also brought to fore differences in perspectives and values, and raised issues on how to respect – or strive to overcome – these.

The two-day conference housed about one hundred and ten participants from all continents – researchers, development practitioners, policy makers, activists, and students – who in presentations and discussions gave rich and comparative perspectives on the complexities of the conference theme.

The articles in this volume are edited versions of keynote presentations at the conference, of introductory presentations held in discussion sessions, as well as short versions of the papers presented in the paper-based sessions, each of which is introduced by the session chair.

We are very happy to be able to offer to our readers this rich collection of case studies and analyses from across the world of how faith-based organisations and communities manifest themselves as important social actors, and how they deal with sometimes conflicting values and notions of social change, within their own communities and in relation to other actors.

Uppsala, March 2013

*Mia Melin and Heidi Moksnes, editors and project co-ordinators*

**Note**

1. The project is based at Uppsala Centre for Sustainable Development at Uppsala University and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. It is funded by Sida between 2009 and 2013. The formal project name is *Civil Society in International Development: Research and Practice*
Introduction

Eva Christina Nilsson and Heidi Moksnes

It is time to take religion seriously. Not because it is more important than anything else, but because religion is part of what influences people, their values, their worldview, and their behaviour. It is a factor as strong as economy and politics. Religion is a tool to relate to a wider reality than yourself, and for many it brings meaning, offers hope, and is a source of inspiration to change. In difficult situations people tend to turn to their religious leaders. If we want to make a difference through political work or development cooperation, we have to understand the contexts in which faith and religion are significant for people.

Religion is important not only at a personal level; societies and politics are influenced as well. Across the world, religious faith motivates people to mobilise around shared spiritual as well as political objectives, forming groups that sometimes are important social actors, whether within civil society or as political parties, directly engaging with state governance. Thus, by understanding the role of religion we can better understand political processes and societal developments.

Somebody said that “there is good religion, bad religion and very bad religion.” Taking religion seriously is not to say that there is only “good” religion. There are innumerable examples of how religion has been used to discriminate women, keep people obedient, promote and fuel conflicts, and to keep HIV/aids out of the agenda. The list goes on. However, this is not a reason to leave religion out of analyses, rather the opposite. Whether religion has consequences regarded as ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ it has to be understood – and the need to understand might be even bigger in situations where religion encourages or is used as a tool for discrimination. Thus, the many positive and good forces of religion are dimensions to build upon when striving for social development, while at the same time isolating negative and oppressive forces.
In Sweden and parts of Europe, religion has been placed in the private sphere, with very little relevance for public life, and in many people’s personal lives, religion has ceased to play an important role. This historic change – this secularisation – has acquired status as social model and norm: as societies develop and become modernised, religion is to become less and less important in public and political life. However, taking a global outlook, the highly secular societies of certain European countries stand out as rather atypical, as does the separation between religion and public life.

The notion and norm of secularisation has fostered a kind of religious illiteracy that is widespread today, and many have lost the language for talking about values, beliefs, and spiritual and religious issues. It might not have been the intention, but ignoring religion has in fact become a way of showing arrogance towards people for whom religion is important. We have to realise, again, that the normal situation for most people is to be part of a religion which influences their lives and actions.

So, what kind of steps need to be taken to understand and acknowledge the role religion has for many people? An increased level of knowledge about religious issues is key. This volume wants to contribute to such learning, and be of help in understanding the complexity of religion and the different roles it can play. The systematised knowledge of religion that exists must be applied and used by people engaged in work for social change and development. Everyone has some kind of relationship to religion, but we should not let our personal experience be the base of systematic analyses. Compare to the discussion on gender some thirty years ago, as pointed out by Petter Jacobsson in this volume, when discussions were based on one’s own experience of equal or unequal relationships. Such conditions are of course important. But today we have learnt to make gender analyses, and to use good check lists when preparing a project or programme. We know what to look for in order to see if a programme is promoting gender equality or rather making space for gender discrimination. That is the kind of journey that has to be made also in relation to religion. A person’s own experience always plays a role, but whether that experience is good or bad must not be made central. A more systematic approach and understanding of how and why people engage in and with
religion is a prerequisite if we want to play a role conducive to development cooperation and international politics. Deeper knowledge and more informed analyses have to influence practical action.

It is equally important to enter into dialogue with people of different faiths, to learn what role religion plays in their particular lives. The former Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm, Krister Stendahl, offered three basic rules for religious dialogue:

- Do not compare the best of your own worldview with the worst of the other person’s world view.
- Find something in the other person’s religion that you can envy.
- Let each religion – rather than its opponents – present itself.

Entering into dialogue with such perspectives may deepen the respect for each other and increase one’s knowledge. There are many examples where dialogue and cooperation between religions have contributed to conflict resolution and good co-existence. In this volume, Clement Joseph and Jeremy Milgrom discuss experiences of interreligious dialogue on Haiti – between Christians, Muslims and Voodoo practitioners – and between Israelis and Palestinians, respectively, and describe the difficulties, gains and hopes these dialogues entail.

The theme for this volume is how religious faith can be a political driving force. This driving force can take very different forms of expression, from counter-hegemonic movements for radical social change, to fundamentalist projects striving to establish or strengthen conservative social orders. How can we understand these diverse faith-inspired actors, who not always fit neatly within liberal notions of civil society? When are they promoters of social change, democratisation, and development – the thematic focus of the volume – and how do the adherents envision such changes? And how do their religious faiths inform their social and political actions? Bringing in analyses of cases from all continents, and addressing all major religions, the volume offers a multitude of experiences and perspectives in answer to these questions.

In her article, Gerrie ter Haar discusses how the institutional separation of religion and politics in Europe became exported to other parts of the world, especially during colonialism, regardless of local forms of
societal organisation. Focusing on the region of sub-Saharan Africa, she discusses how this model has clashed with the spirit orientation common in African religious belief. Here, religion and politics do not constitute separate spheres; rather, religion constitutes an alternative source of power. Outsiders have commonly regarded peoples’ concern with the spiritual world as an escape from ‘real problems,’ such as corruption or human rights violations. However, ter Haar argues that the notion of transformational social change, much emphasised by Western development agencies, has strong resonance in new as well as traditional religious thought in many regions in Africa.

Azza Karam, too, in her article on the Middle East and North Africa, discusses the intrinsic intersection of religion and politics in this region, as well as the position of women as social and political actors. Addressing especially political Islam and the Arab revolutions, she discusses how both women and youth have changed their earlier social positions and political visions in ways that are religiously inspired and will have long-lasting effects on their societies.

Gender and religion in the Arab spring is in focus in one of the thematic sessions of the volume as well, discussed by its four contributors. The other three thematic sessions address liberation theology, socially engaged Buddhism, and religion and grass-roots politics in Africa. Through their articles, the contributors bring us a multitude of perspectives on how religion, social action and political visions are integrated by people across continents, where their different faiths form the basis for the values they strive to enact.

The last decades, the notion of secularisation as a predestined global development has become questioned within development cooperation. Gerard Clarke describes how this change was initiated in the late 1990s, when policy-makers started to discuss the relation between faith and development, and how to mitigate the conflict they frequently encountered between secular and religious values, and between norms set up among global institutions and different religious and cultural value systems.

The United Nations, especially through the United Nations Population Fund, is today actively promoting cooperation with faith-based organisations, a work which Azza Karam describes in her second article
in the volume. However, similarly to Clarke, she points out a problem-
atric tendency of treating religious leaders instrumentally, as a means to
reach objectives set primarily by secular partners, who commonly also
are the financial donors. As Clarke notes, the work needs to be based on
mutual respect and a commitment to dialogue in spite of these unequal
partnership positions.

The tension – and sometimes conflict – between different values and
objectives is especially salient when it comes to sexual and reproductive
rights, a topic addressed by Gunilla Hallonsten. In her article, she depicts
how adherents and leaders of different religions have strived to find
ways to accommodate as well as challenge norms and values within their
religious traditions, opening for the recognition of for example universal
human rights.

Vinu Aram, on her part, describes development oriented work in India
that is part of the Gandhian movement, successfully combining Hindu
concepts concerning the integration of spiritual development and social
action, with notions of economic and social development. Through a
critical but respectful conversation between religious and secular actors, she
concludes, we can accomplish more together, and understand how “faith
within civil society is transforming religious actors as drivers of change.”

It is, truly, time to take religion seriously.

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Let us begin with an image. It is from the very first lecture of development studies that I participated in. Day one on the course: As the lecturer tries to describe development, two lists of words appear. First comes a list of words describing the underdeveloped:

- Village
- Farmer/peasant
- Subsistance farming
- Traditional values
- Collective values
- Religion

And a list of word describing the developed:

- Urbanisation
- Industrial worker
- Division of labour
- Modernity
- Individual values
- Rationality

The one side was gaining – and the other, by necessity, had to diminish and disappear into the shadows of history. I think many of us have had the same view of religion as something of the past, something that will disappear into the abyss or at least into the private sector of life, just as it has in Western Europe over the past fifty years. No wonder there is a complicated relation between religion and development.

Let us take a look at another image: a discussion on gender issues 30 years ago. The discussion was followed by personal remarks, private references, and even giggles. There was at the time incapability to separate one’s immediate personal experiences from the topic. Today we can talk
about gender issues in a professional manner, without references to our personal experiences of doing the dishes, or the level of gender equality in our own families. But when it comes to religion, we are still at the same level as we were concerning gender 30 years ago. It gets too personal, it gets too close. We are not able to encounter it without bringing our entire backpack of personal experiences, fears, sublimated religious memories, traditions. What we need is a professional approach to religion.

Tom Kristiansen, Norwegian news anchor, described 20 years ago how the secular Norwegian aid worker in Sub-Saharan Africa was a complete UFO in a world where everything was religion, and how words were missing to describe the reality of the ever-present religion he/she met. This is still the situation.

Effectiveness is frequently a topic when development aid is discussed. Lack of knowledge, or lack of words to describe reality, will always have an impact on effect. This volume and several others like it in the past few years are a sign that religion is now given the importance it deserves in the development discussion. But there is still a lack of knowledge; there is prejudice and misinformation about the role of religion in development.

This notwithstanding, church people now enthusiastically sense a dawning interest in the relationship between religion and development. I perceive a certain pride and joy in faith-based organisations over this awakened interest, and I think this is right and justified. There has been a recurrent saying in government agencies and other back donors: “You do a good job, too bad you have to be religious” or “And we really do think that you have a hidden agenda.” Let us hope that those times are gone, and that back donors and secular development organisations will be able to see the faith based organisations as many of them are: professional, grounded, sustainable, and deeply rooted in civil society, both here and in developing countries.

There are problems, though. Sometimes back donors jump to the conclusion that Western faith-based organisations could function as megaphones for Western values into more conservative societies in the South. I hear the words ‘added value’ as if organisations like my own were mere instruments of a Western agenda. I do think that faith-based organisations have a special possibility to meet and engage with other
people of faith, even people of other faiths than our own. We have access to arenas closed to others; we have deep and old bonds with churches in the global South. But we do not necessarily share values with them, even though we share faith. Values and faith are not the same. We cannot expect that believers in the South are going to adapt to Western values as a natural evolution, from conservative to liberal. Even if the church in the North has had the privilege of setting the agenda for the largest part of the last century, this does not mean that it is so now, nor that it will be so in the future. Increasing debate and disagreement between churches in the North and in the South are surely to come. It is a long time since the North had the mandate or, for that matter, the will to dictate.

On the other hand, there is also the misconception that religious communities are rigid and impossible to change. We often describe religious bodies and leaders as a hindrance to a rights-based approach, as a stumbling-block to values we would like to see gaining ground. This is not necessarily so. Some of the most challenging social ideas are now shaped within religious communities in the South, many of them by feminist theologians from all world religions. Dynamic discussions are taking place in the religious arena, all over the place.

My point is that the changes we will see in developing countries – when it comes to human rights, equality, improvements as regards reproductive health, or any other issue that is sensitive among religious persons – will come, largely, as a change within the faith communities, not from the outside. Change will come through processes among believers. Respectful understanding and communication with those forums are necessary to understand the development processes taking place. We need knowledge about religious people.

It is being said that religion is back, but I would say that it was never gone. It was never out of sight. Maybe media in Europe has rediscovered religion, but the religion they have rediscovered is an extreme version: the religion of American presidential candidates competing for votes from conservative people; or Islamist reactions to globalisation and rather aggressive Western culture and commercialism, a political version of religion shared by a small fraction of the world’s Muslims. That is the
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religion that seems to be back, but I would argue that this is a rather marginal religion.

There is another kind, a kind that was never gone: millions of people every Sunday morning, sometimes before sunrise, putting their best clothes on, wandering off to a small chapel or a large cathedral, or Friday afternoon going to the mosque, or stopping at the roadside shrine in some Asian county. The billions of prayers whispered every moment, all the time. Billions of people in a lowly way, turning to something outside of themselves, to find structure, meaning, hope, and comfort in lifting their eyes above the immediate needs of the day. This is religion as a source of hope in a fragmented world, a deep sense that there is justice beyond the injustices of the world, the sense of belonging and respect for creation and the neighbour, that runs like a thread through all religions of the world.

I wonder if anyone could ever calculate the market value of that hope and wholeness. What impact on development does this input from ‘the spiritual’ world have? It is very likely impossible to assess, or put into any log-frame or project application, this input from faith to development. Yet, it is maybe the largest contribution of all from religion to development – as well as the most important driver of change.

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Religion and development: Challenges for donors and for faith groups

Gerard Clarke

It is now over 15 years since development policy-makers rediscovered religion, following decades of neglect and a narrow focus on the material, primarily economic, aspects of development. In 1997, the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr George Carey, the symbolic head of the Anglican Communion, the third largest grouping of Christians in the world, received a surprise phone-call from James Wolfensohn, the then President of the World Bank. In the phone conversation, Wolfensohn expressed astonishment that the Bank had few meaningful relationships with faith groups or communities, despite its recognition that they played an important role in the lives of the poor. Wolfensohn mentioned the example of Tanzania where, the World Bank estimated, 50 percent of education, health care and social services were provided by faith communities (Carey 2008: xv). The phone-call led to a series of conferences bringing donor representatives and faith leaders together to discuss the relationship between faith and development: in London in 1998, Washington DC in 1999, and Canterbury (in England) in 2002.

Much happened between 1997 and 2002. Wolfensohn and Carey launched a new organisation, the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), in 1997 to sustain the new discourse. Wolfensohn also established a small Directorate on Faith within the Bank, later renamed the Development Dialogue on Ethics and Values, to sustain World Bank participation in this new discourse. New research meanwhile revealed the rationale for, and importance of, donor interest in organised religion. World Bank research, for instance, revealed that across Sub-Saharan Africa, and not just in Tanzania, more than 50 percent of health and
education services were provided by faith communities at the beginning of the new millennium (Wolfensohn 2004). And a major World Bank study (2000), *Voices of the Poor*, revealed that poor people in developing countries placed greater trust in faith-based institutions and in religious leaders than in state institutions or political leaders, the principal partners of the Bank (cf Narayan 2001).

These activities occurred in parallel to important developments in US politics. Following the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, US politics experienced a seismic shift, as mainstream Christian denominations were displaced by the exponential growth of the US Christian Right, centred on evangelical and Pentecostal congregations and their leaders. A born-again (evangelical) Christian, Reagan mobilised the Christian right in support of his domestic and foreign policy, especially his opposition to communism, with dramatic consequences. By 2003, for instance, an estimated 43 percent of the US electorate was evangelical (Waldman 2004), a significant shift away from the mainstream Christian denominations towards a more fervent, and ideologically right-wing, form of faith. In the US, the Christian right has been influential in the passage of legislation that guides US foreign policy. This influence is exercised in part by charismatic leaders, abetted by significant media access, but organisations that represent the thousands of evangelical and Pentecostal congregations form a vital bulwark. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), for instance, had 30 million members in 2005 (up from 2.6 million in 1980s; NAE 2005), and has become an important participant in debates around US policy on international development.

The traditional divide between Church and State in US public policy was eroded by the ‘Charitable Choice’ provisions in the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, rendering it more difficult for government officials to deny funding to organisations that combined service provision with overtly religious activity. It was further eroded by the passage of the 2001 Faith-Based and Community Initiatives Act, reversely the ‘pervasively sectarian’ doctrine previously upheld by the US Supreme Court. This legislation has significant consequences for US policy on international development. In December 2002, Executive Order 13280 created a new Center for Faith Based and Community Initiatives (CFBCI) in the United States
Agency for International Development (USAID), designed to ensure that provisions of the 2001 Act were reflected in USAID policy. This was followed by new USAID rules on ‘Participation by Religious Orders in USAID Programs’, effective from October 2004 (USAID 2004). The 2004 rules radically transform USAID policy on engagement with FBOs.

Under the old doctrine, religious organisations engaging in discriminatory or sectarian practices were barred from government funding. Under the new ruling, however, USAID cannot discriminate against organisations which combine development or humanitarian activities with ‘inherently religious activities’ such as worship, religious instruction or proselytisation. USAID-funded activities must be separated ‘by time or space’ from ‘inherently religious activities,’ but some fear that such distinctions are blurred in practice. The ruling, for instance, prevents discrimination against organisations providing social services in a religious setting (eg a building characterised by religious iconography), or which engage in discriminatory practices in the hiring of staff (ie restricting paid employment to adherents of a particular faith). This means, in practice, that USAID-funded buildings used for the delivery of social services can also be used (but not at the same time) for ‘inherently religious activities’. Similarly, FBOs cannot discriminate against non-believers in the provision of USAID-supported services, but there is no obligation on them to explain that non-believers can avail of such services on an equal basis.

Beyond the general criticism of the 2001 Act, the USAID ruling provokes further concern with its suggestion that less stringent legal standards (than those applicable to domestic programmes) might apply to foreign assistance. Ostensibly designed to equalise the treatment of secular and religious organisations, it effectively tilts the balance in favour of the latter, since US or foreign NGOs that provide information on abortion (and which, by definition, are overwhelmingly secular) were ineligible for USAID funding during the two Bush Administrations.

These developments led to concern within the international donor community, at the prospect of a contentious new discourse that pitted, for example, the US against European donors. They were part of the reason, for instance, why the Executive Board of the World Bank denied further funding to James Wolfensohn in 1998 to explore the faith and
development interface, and why the Directorate on Faith was renamed the Development Dialogue on Ethics and Values. Nevertheless, the faith-and-development interface developed and flourished, albeit with less political piquancy than in US public policy. A series of books appeared in parallel with the three major conferences, including Belshaw et al (2000), Marshall and Marsh (2003), Marshall and Keough (2004) and Marshall and Van Saanen (2007). These provide potted case-studies of fruitful engagement between donors and faith groups, and some of the operational and theological imperatives behind them. And beyond this World Bank-driven work, multi-lateral and bilateral donors alike have initiated new forms of dialogue and partnership with faith groups at home and abroad, and organisations from a variety of religious traditions have reciprocated. But dialogue and partnership remain challenging. In the sections below, I explore some of the challenges for donors and faith groups alike.

The ‘agents of transformation’ debate

In contrast to the binding legislation and subsidiary rules in the case of the US, international donors resorted to a series of exhortations in transforming their relationships with faith-based organisations. By the early years of the millennium, for instance, donors were challenging faith-based organisations to become more actively involved in the fight against global poverty. The agenda emerges in part from the findings of the *Voices of the Poor* study. FBOs, the study noted,

emerge frequently in poor people’s lists of important institutions. They appear more frequently as the most important institutions in rural rather than in urban ones. Spirituality, faith in God and connecting to the sacred in nature are an integral part of poor people’s lives in many parts of the world. Religious organisations are also valued for the assistance they provide to poor people (Narayan 2000, p 222).

This acknowledgement of faith and associated organisations in the lives of the poor was largely unprecedented in the discourse of major donor agencies such as the World Bank, and signalled a significant shift in thinking. The acknowledgement, however, was far from uncritical or
insensitive to some of the more negative connotations of faith in the lives of the poor: “[T]he role that religious or faith-based organisations play in poor people’s lives,” the study concluded:

varies from being a balm for the body and soul to being a divisive force in the community. In ratings of effectiveness in both urban and rural settings, religious organisations feature more prominently than any single type of state institution but they do not disappear when ineffective institutions are mentioned (Narayan 2000, p 222).

FBOs, the Bank suggested, could be a potent force in the lives of the poor, where they focused on material as well as spiritual poverty, avoided divisive or sectarian agendas, and became more involved in the daily struggles of the faithful.

This bifocal view of faith and FBOs, as both a potent and ineffectual force in the lives of the poor, led to admonitions from the World Bank that FBOs “must become agents of transformation, using their influence to demand better governance and public accountability” (Narayan 2001, p 47). This call was repeated by Clare Short, the UK cabinet member for international development between 1997 and 2003 and an active participant in the dialogue begun by Wolfensohn and Carey. At the Canterbury conference in 2002, Short challenged faith leaders to assume a greater role in the fight against global poverty by shifting their focus from charity to justice, and by playing a greater role in making governments politically accountable to their constituencies:

[Faith] groups have to move beyond charity… Real charity is justice. We need to mobilise that core of moral teachings that lies at the heart of each of the world’s great religions: that life must be just and fair and that all human beings deserve respect and the opportunity to enjoy their humanity and practice their spirituality… The challenge must fall at least partly on faith groups in rich countries to embrace higher ambitions, to convince those countries to back the right policies, to spend money well (Short 2003, pp 8-9).

If faith-based organisations were to adapt in this way, Short suggested, to become more engaged in public policy debates, more embedded in
Religion and development: Challenges for donors and faith groups

pro-poor alliances and networks at national and international level and more active in representing faith-based constituencies, the potential for positive catalytic change would be enormous (ibid).

The message from the World Bank and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) was stern if inviting: donors actively sought dialogue and partnership with FBOs, but such organisations had to adapt to fulfil their expected roles. To some faith leaders, the admonition was inappropriate; many faiths have long sought ‘justice’ for the poor, including, but not confined to, material advancement, and the World Bank and other donors, they argued, oppress the poor as much as they help them, for instance in their over-zealous championing of the free market.⁴ The message also made for uneasy relationships with FBOs, keen to maintain their autonomy and avoid cooption by donor agencies. Research confirms some of these FBO concerns, suggesting that donors also face challenges in becoming equivalent ‘agents of transformation,’ capable of harnessing the potential of faith communities to be transformative actors in the cause of international development. Interviews with officials at DFID in 2004–2005, for instance, revealed a significant divide between those keen to harness the moral energy of faith communities in support of the Millennium Development Goals, and those concerned at the erosion of DFID’s traditional secularism and the conceptual separation of the church and state on which it rested (see Clarke 2007). In the latter camp, some feared DFID entanglement in sectarian or divisive agendas. They argued that the faith identities of the poor should not be privileged over their other myriad identities, that the assertion of class or gender identities, for instance, holds more power to empower the poor. Some argued that faith is mixed up inextricably with culture and is difficult to isolate in any useful sense. Some argued that organised religion promotes social exclusion – that most world religions, for example, have played a critical role in the social encoding of male and female roles, to the detriment of women and girls.

Many of these concerns are captured by the Nobel laureate and leading philosopher of development, Amartya Sen. A staunch secularist (influenced in significant part by the smouldering inter-religious conflicts of post-independence Indian history), Sen has railed against “religious
partitioning,” the religion-centred analysis of people and place (Sen 2006, p 60). “The effect,” he argues,

of this religion-centred political approach, and of the institutional policies it has generated (with frequent pronouncements of the kind, to cite one example, “the government is meeting Muslim leaders in the next vital stage designed to cement a unite front”), has been to bolster and strengthen the voice of religious authorities while downgrading the importance of nonreligious institutions and movements (ibid, p 77).

There is no intrinsic reason, however, why engagement with faith groups and leaders should necessarily downgrade the importance of non-religious institutions and movements. The challenge for donors is to ensure that religious institutions, which are valued by the poor and which serve to link them to often-remote donor institutions, are not marginalised by a donor discourse, which is secular in character and imbued with an elaborate value system, difficult for groups of the poor to understand. In an elegant riposte to Sen, Kwame Antony Appiah writes of the urgent need for “ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become” (Appiah 2006, p xiii). The son of an elder of the Methodist Church in Ghana, Appiah writes of society as a “shattered mirror” in which “each shard reflects one part of a complex truth from its own particular angle” (ibid, p 8). “The result,” Appiah claims, “is that you will find parts of the truth everywhere and the whole truth nowhere,” and our biggest mistake, “to think that your little shard can reflect the whole” (ibid). But this over-arching challenge serves to frame a number of more specific, operational challenges.

**Codes of Conduct**

One key challenge for donors and FBOs alike is to move beyond general pronouncements to specific and binding commitments of the form represented by the Codes of Conduct evident in other areas of development policy. The 1995 Red Cross Code of Conduct,\(^5\) for instance, governs the activities of non-governmental humanitarian agencies responding to both natural and man-made humanitarian crises.\(^6\) Significantly, four of the eight sponsors of the Code are faith-based agencies while four are secular,
symbolising the concrete nexus between faith-based and secular discourse in the context of humanitarian intervention. The Code places obligations on faith-based humanitarian agencies and on the secular-minded donors that provide much of their funding. Faith groups are enjoined to provide humanitarian aid in an impartial or non-discriminatory manner, i.e. on the basis of need and not creed. Parties commit that “We will not tie the promise, delivery or distribution of assistance to the embracing or acceptance of a particular political or religious creed.”

Significantly, however, the Code does not prohibit the use of aid in furthering the proselytising objectives of organisations that combine evangelism, i.e. spreading the word of God and seeking converts to the faith, with humanitarian service.

This concern, however, is addressed in an important document agreed in 2011 after protracted negotiations over five years between the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Religious Dialogue and the World Evangelical Alliance, three leading organisations representing the main strands of Western Christianity. In *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct* (World Council of Churches et al, 2011), the parties place the concept of ‘Christian Witness’ at the heart of the traditional concept of ‘mission,’ the proclaiming of the gospel to others, providing a theological case for Christian organisations and their staff to work with people from other faiths on the basis of mutual respect. “Christians,” it argues, “should continue to build relationships of respect and trust with people of different religions so as to facilitate deeper mutual understanding, reconciliation and cooperation for the common good” (ibid, p 3).

Significantly, the document seeks to displace or to dilute the role of conversion in contemporary missionary activity, suggesting that conversion is God’s work, not that of his servants. “Christians,” it argues, “affirm that while it is their responsibility to witness to Christ, conversion is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit…They recognise that the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills in ways over which no human being has control” (ibid, p 2). In so doing, it addresses one of the central concerns of donor organisations which fund Christian FBOs, i.e. that public funds should not be used in support of conversions – but also an argument of
some missionary organisations, that it is difficult in practice to separate development from missionary activity.

It also commits Christians to defending religious pluralism, and opposing religious persecution. “Where any religion is instrumentalised for political ends or where religious persecution occurs,” the document enjoins, “Christians are called to engage in prophetic witness denouncing such actions” (ibid, p 3). Here, the document supports a key principle of international human rights law (that everyone has the right to freedom of religion and to be free of coercion in the exercise of that right), but it immerses organisations in political conflicts in the case of countries such as Pakistan, Iraq, Syria and Egypt, where Christians and other religious minorities are persecuted or the target of violence. Some donors will be keen to take a stand on such issues, especially those working in fragile, ‘crisis’ or conflict-affected states, where religion and culture are usually significant social variables, but others will shy away, viewing them as peripheral to their focus on poverty reduction in low income countries.

The document warns against the abuse of power in Christian witness. It argues, for instance, that missionaries should not use ‘deception’ or ‘coercive means’ in their missionary activity, addressing a concern in non-Christian societies that a tiny number of missionary organisations, primarily US-based, plant covert missionaries, hence damaging the reputation of other missionaries. It also argues that missionaries should not exploit situations of poverty and should not provide material incentives, addressing a traditional concern among development practitioners about ‘rice Christians,’ (ie people who convert to Christianity, often under pressure, in return for material rewards such as food), or the instrumentalising of poor communities by missionary organisations.

Many faith-based humanitarian agencies, however, remain unaware of their obligations under the 1995 Red Cross Code, much less this more recent document, so collectively they face significant challenges in internalising these new operational norms. Established development agencies, representing the Catholic Church and the mainstream Protestant denominations, face fewer challenges, however, than organisations from the evangelical or Pentecostal traditions or from a variety of Christian
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traditions (varying from country to country) which mix development work with evangelism.

The DFID partnership principles

The challenges facing faith groups and organisations in engaging with bilateral and multi-lateral donors are spelt out in another 2011 document, from the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Since the launch of the new faith and development discourse in 1997, DFID has been a prominent actor in its elaboration. Since then it has agreed framework contracts with Islamic Relief and World Vision, broadening its traditional engagement with mainstream Christian organisations such as Christian Aid and the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development (CAFOD); it has worked with UK faith groups to promote the Millennium Developments Goals in the idioms of the major world faiths; encouraged multi-faith dialogue and partnerships; and funded a £5 million research programme on religion and development between 2005 and 2010. This contrasts with other European countries, where donors have faced greater political constraints in engaging with faith groups. In the Netherlands, for instance, a Knowledge Center on Religion and Development (KCRD) was established in 2006 by Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and Hindu NGOs. It was established both to facilitate multi-faith networking by, and knowledge exchange between, Dutch NGOs, and to create links between Dutch FBOs and the Directorate General for International Cooperation (DGIS, the development cooperation arm of the Dutch Foreign Ministry). To date, however, the Dutch KCRD has received no public funding and has no formal relationship with the DGIS. The Center facilitated some dialogue with DGIS staff during the Premiership of Jen Peter Balkenedde (2002–2010) but under the Premiership of Mark Rutter (2010–2012), dialogue was difficult because of the coalition government’s dependency on support from Geert Wilders and the right-wing (and anti-immigrant) Party for Freedom.

Following a change of government in the UK in 2010 (in which the centre-left Labour Party administration was replaced by a centre-right coalition between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties), the new Secretary of State for International Development, Andrew Mitchell
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(MP) established a Faith Partnership Principles Working Group in June 2011, to establish a new *modus vivendi* between DFID and faith-based organisations seeking DFID funding. Although still not published, *Partnership Principles: Working Effectively with faith groups to fight global poverty* of November 2011 sets out three main principles, as follows:

- *transparency*: faith groups, DFID and those working for them need to be open about their mission, beliefs, values, policies and practices;
- *mutual recognition* of the distinctive roles and contributions and added value of faith groups and DFID to development; and
- *understanding* of the complexity of faith in development and partnership with faith groups.

These principles challenge faith groups on a variety of fronts: to be frank about their beliefs and activities, to provide empirical proof of their contribution to development, and to understand, and respond positively to how they are perceived in development contexts.

In turn, the document sets out a series of policy or thematic areas where these principles will be applied:

- building a common understanding of faith and development;
- measuring the impact of faith groups through research; and
- working with difficult areas: agreeing to disagree.

In turn, this commits both parties to further dialogue and partnership, to research undertaken jointly or individually, and to working together despite disagreements.

**The struggle between secular and religious values**

The faith-and-development interface, however, is also challenging for donors. Within individual donor organisations, staff is often opposed to entreaties to religious organisations or leaders, and levels of faith literacy can be low, leaving many staff in relative ignorance of the complex relationships between faith and development. A more significant challenge for donors involves the funding relationship between themselves and their ‘partners.’ Donors channel significant volumes of funding through faith-based humanitarian and development organisations, and are therefore inclined to view them in instrumental terms, for instance,
as sub-contractors. They are often concerned, for example, to define how and where faith-based organisations add value or provide a distinctive counterpart to the activities of secular organisations. But they also seek to keep a close rein over faith-based organisations in direct receipt of funding, ensuring a close degree of policy convergence. This is sometimes a problem in the case of the leading Northern FBOs, with whom they have long-standing relationships, but it can also be a problem with the Southern partners of Northern FBOs, raising questions as to how far down the aid pipeline donor conditionality can apply.

Donors, for instance often support the work of official development agencies of the Catholic Church, despite fundamental disagreements on such matters as the use of artificial contraception to strengthen the sexual and reproductive rights of women and to combat the spread of HIV and aids. But the relatively recent commitment to a rights-based approach to development (since roughly 2000) brings donors into new conflicts with Christian FBOs in the North, especially over gay rights. At its 2010 General Assembly, for instance, the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS), an organisation in receipt of funding from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), decided to deny permanent contracts to gay and lesbian staff in active relationships. Norad provides funding to NMS through Digni, an umbrella organisation of 18 church and missionary organisations involved in development work overseas. Norad contacted Digni after the decision and asked it to explain to NMS that the decision was incompatible with receipt of public funding, but Digni defended the right of NMS to maintain its own distinctive values. Norad backed down, and the NMS ban remains in place.\(^\text{11}\)

The issues here are sensitive and the challenges significant. The Red Cross Code of Conduct, for example, states that “donor[s]...should provide funding with a guarantee of operational independence;”\(^\text{12}\) as non-governmental humanitarian agencies (NGHAs) treat beneficiary communities impartially, so donors must treat NGHAs impartially. In addition, the Code states that donors must engage with NGHAs “in a spirit of partnership which respects the integrity and independence of all partners.”\(^\text{13}\) In engaging with faith-based organisations, however, this provides a particular challenge for secular-minded Nordic donors.
The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) is the largest of the Nordic donors. It maintains framework agreements with 15 civil society organisations – Swedish or with a significant presence in Sweden – including four Christian organisations: Diakonia (a joint agency of four mainstream Christian denominations), Svenska Missionrådet (Swedish Missionary Council), Svenska kyrkan (the Church of Sweden), and PMU Interlife (an agency of Swedish Pentecostal Churches). It also supports Northern FBOs through other funding streams and, indirectly, the work of Southern FBOs in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Sweden is both a secular and a democratic society, and Sida faces significant pressure from the public, the media, and from particular political parties to ensure that Swedish aid is used in a manner which is compatible with Swedish values. As a result, it has set out a number of expectations of its Northern and Southern partners, including FBOs. Faith-based organisations in receipt of Swedish funding, for instance, must be “rooted in democratic values.” They are also expected to abide by the Red Cross Code of Conduct, to avoid proselytising activity, and to refrain from opposing the sexual and reproductive rights of women, including the right to a safe abortion.

These concerns are illustrated by a dispute with one of its partners, which spread to its relations with Swedish FBOs. In November 2011, officials of the Swedish embassy in Rwanda contacted the local office of Norsk Folkehjelp (Norwegian Peoples Aid, NPA), expressing concern over the activities of the Rwandan Civil Society Platform (RCSP), and some of its members. Sida provided funding to RCSP and its members through NPA as part of the Public Policy Information Monitoring and Advocacy (PPIMA) programme, which Sida co-funded with the UK Department for International Development. In November 2011, the Rwandan Platform sent a letter to Rwandan President Paul Kagame, opposing draft legislation to liberalise Rwanda’s controversial anti-abortion legislation. The proposed legislation reduced the maximum sentence for a woman convicted of procuring an abortion from 15 to 3 years, and it introduced legal abortion in cases of rape, incest or danger to the life of the mother. Sida argued that Swedish funding to RCSP
and its members through NPA and the PPIMA programme could not be used to oppose international human rights standards to which Sweden was a party, including sexual and reproductive rights for women, and asked the Platform to refrain from opposing the proposed legislation. In March 2012, however, RSCP resumed its opposition to the legislation, posting oppositional statements on its website, while representatives of member organisations denounced it on radio programmes.

In April 2012, the row broadened, when Sida wrote to its framework agreement partners, noting its intention to introduce new contractual terms that required all organisations in recipient of Swedish public funds to refrain from opposing “Swedish values” and “international human rights,” seeking advice from partners of their experience of dealing with such opposition. Some framework partners, including FBOs, were concerned by the reference to the relatively opaque concept of “Swedish values,” rather than to policies or contractual terms. Who defines “Swedish values,” and how could framework partners be expected to enforce them all the way down complex aid pipelines, involving many layers of partnership or funding relationships?

By May 2012, the Rwandan legislation had been passed, but the dispute remained on-going. Sida threatened to cut funding to RSCP and its members, unless agreement could be reached on future advocacy activities. At heart, the dispute involved a conflict between the values of international donors and those of some of their partners in developing countries, as much as between secular and religious values, and it involved organisations (NPA, the RSCP, and its members) which are not faith-based. Nevertheless, it illustrates the challenges that donors face in engaging with faith-based organisations that draw on distinctive religious and cultural value systems, and the particular challenge arising from an apparent chasm between human rights and religious discourses (even though religious groups have been important advocates of universal human rights standards).

Conclusion
The chasm, of course, is far wider than that between donors and faith-based organisations in the context of international development. In many
Northern countries, church and state are engaged in a difficult dialogue about contentious issues, such as gay marriage and the broader place of religious values in public policy, set against a debate about the place of plural value systems in multi-cultural societies. Organisations from other religious traditions, and from other cultural communities, are also important participants in these debates. But so, too, are the advocates of militant secularism, ie organisations and activists who argue that religion is irrational and that it exerts a malign influence on public policy. The resonance or back wash from these debates, however, can be magnified in the context of international development, where the number and diversity of countries, cultures, and organisational partners enhances the plurality of value systems, and the potential for conflict.

Over the last 15 years, donors and faith-based organisations have staked out a common ground based on common objectives, such as the Millennium Development Goals and (most) universal human rights standards. European donors have partnerships with prominent Christian FBOs, which have strong historical resonance, and some donors, such as the DFID, have established strong links to non-Christian organisations, such as Islamic Relief. In developing countries, Christian FBOs are working with agencies from other religious traditions, and donors have funded programmes that bring organisations from different religious traditions into contact with each other. New Codes of Conduct or partnership principles provide a basis for developing such partnerships and for moving beyond the general principles of the faith and development interface, but as the examples above suggest, the faith and development interface remains a challenging one for donors. The danger, of course, is that donor control of the purse strings leads to an unequal dialogue, in which FBOs are treated in an instrumental way. Donors therefore need to tread carefully, and ensure that they abide by equivalent standards to those which they seek to enforce on aid recipients. Mutual respect and commitment to dialogue between donors and faith groups are, therefore, central pillars of the faith and development interface as it continues to develop, more than 15 years after it was first elaborated.
Notes
1. See p 11, footnote 2, of the ruling.
2. Under the ‘Mexico City Policy’ (66 FR 17303).
4. Anonymous interviews with FBO representatives in the UK.
5. The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/idrl/I259EN.pdf
6. The later Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response incorporates the Red Cross Code of Conduct. See http://www.sphereproject.org/
7. Article 3, Red Cross Code.
8. See, for instance, Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
9. The number of Christians is falling in a number of countries in North Africa, the Middle East and in parts of South Asia amid the rise of political Islam and of religious conflict. In Pakistan, for instance, the only Christian cabinet member in the country’s post-independence history, Shabaz Bhatti, was murdered in March 2011, in part because of his opposition to Pakistan’s controversial blasphemy laws, three months after the murder of the Governor of Punjab province, Salman Taseer. Taseer had also opposed the blasphemy laws and appealed for a pardon for a Christian woman, Asia Bibi, sentenced to death for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad.
11. Jørn Lemvik, General Secretary, Digni, communication with author.
12. Article 2, Annex II.
13. Article 1, Annex III.
16. The following paragraph is based on communication with Joakim Molander, Embassy of Sweden, Kigali.
17. For background on the controversy surrounding the reform of anti-abortion legislation in Rwanda, see the report “Conditioned legalization of abortion divides Rwandan society” from Radio Netherlands Worldwide published on 12 May, 2012: http://www.rnw.nl/africa/article/conditioned-legalization-abortion-divides-rwandan-society (accessed October 15, 2012). The report notes, for instance, that an estimated 60,000 abortions are performed in Rwanda each year, with women’s lives endangered by the clandestine nature of the operations.
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19. The letter was discussed in a session on religious vs secular values at the Uppsala conference (op cit), when one of the speakers, Sida’s Georg Andrén, was questioned by conference participants.


References


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The focus of this volume is on religious actors as important social actors or drivers of change, particularly as promoters of social change, democracy and development. It is an acknowledgement of the vital role that religious communities and similar organised groups and their leaders play in achieving goals that Western policy-makers and development agents consider important for the progress of many non-Western societies, which are also often poor. While such a focus reflects an important insight into the functioning of those societies, in my article I want to move away from the emphasis on the institutional aspect of religion – easiest for us to deal with – and highlight the importance of the type of ideas that sustain religious communities: something far more difficult to grasp and work with, but of crucial importance for effective forms of cooperation. We have to ask ourselves what kinds of ideas drive religious actors – most of whom are ordinary believers – and motivate them to do the sort of things they actually do. This will help us to explain why they do them, and why in this particular way. We need to understand the thinking, reasoning and motivation of faith-inspired actors. For effective cooperation it is important that civil society groups, even if they are secular, collaborate with religious communities and their leaders not just in practical terms, as they often do, but also engage with them at the level of ideas.

The latter is particularly important if we want to try and understand the role of religion in politics and public life, as I have been specifically asked to discuss on this occasion, with a focus on Africa. I will do so by emphasising the role of history, which is not often considered in the development debate, and the effect this has had and continues to have on our understanding of the concepts of both religion and politics. My disciplinary lens will be that of a scholar of religion. A continuing problem
remains the assumption that by using the same terminology, we also mean the same thing, for example when we talk about religion, or democracy, etc. In my article, I will plead for a more historical approach that looks at the specific context in which certain concepts are used, notably the concept of religion itself. I will then illustrate my point by discussing some relevant aspects of one of the most remarkable religious trends of our time, the rise of the so-called charismatic churches, which are immensely popular in Africa and also in many other parts of the non-Western world, as well as among immigrant communities in Europe (and North America for that matter). My choice to zoom in on a particular Christian trend, rather than on comparable developments in Islam, has practical grounds: Western policy-makers, development agents, and civil society groups are more often affiliated with Christian counterparts (often former mission churches). But the basic argument of this article can be extended to other religious traditions.

**History matters**

The connection – or rather: reconnection – between religion and politics, I have argued before (ter Haar 2007, pp 19-27), is one of the burning issues of our time. We only need to look at recent events in North Africa and the Middle East to realise how important an issue this has become, not only as a threat (eg terrorism) but also as an opportunity (eg the Arab spring). Whereas many Western observers seem to expect that the logical and inevitable outcome of the revolutionary processes taking place in this part of the world is a form of democracy that separates religion from public life and relegates it to the private sphere, this is clearly not going to happen. The reason for this is to be found in history. The intellectual and institutional separation of religion and politics has deep roots in the history of Europe, from where it originally emerged. Offering a model that has served Europe well up to this day, it became exported to other parts of the world, especially at the time of colonialism, ignoring the historical realities that had shaped other societies. One important historical reality is the fact that religion – in its different manifestations – traditionally played a role in the governing of society, with greater or lesser success, but for present purposes this is not the point I wish to make. The point is that
the new interactions between religion and politics that we see unfolding in various parts of the world today are rooted in the specific histories of people, born and bred in other continents. If we want to understand their motivations for improving their own conditions, we have to take these specific histories into account. Clearly, most of them do not believe – as we do – that in order to live a successful life one has to separate religion from politics. Although they may intellectually and practically distinguish between the spheres of religion on the one hand and politics on the other, they may no longer wish to separate them on grounds that find their historical justification in the specific circumstances of the West. In many places the growing role of religion in the public sphere represents a form of historical continuity with a pre-colonial past that may be seen as a form of mental decolonisation.

If we look at current events from a broader and deeper historical perspective, we can also begin to see that religion and politics have more in common than we may be inclined to think. For many people in the world, religion and politics constitute alternative sources of power, located in the material and spiritual spheres respectively. This is evidently so in Africa, where both sources of power are frequently drawn upon by individuals and their communities for all sorts of purposes that people in Western Europe may habitually consider to be either religious or political in nature (Ellis and ter Haar 2004). It is here that we can come to see the need to reconsider the Western European use of these concepts in light of the meanings attached to them by people steeped in a different historical tradition. I have often pointed out in my own work that in Africa, ‘religion’ primarily refers to a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one and believed to be home to spiritual beings that are deemed to have effective powers over the material world. Spirituality, in this context, is not a philosophical abstraction, but something with a real presence, something that is related to what people perceive as a world of spirits, ie beings that are invisible but in many respects similar to human beings. To believers, the spirit world is an integral part of the ‘real’ world, which cannot be reduced to its visible or material form only. In such a holistic perception of the world, it follows that people’s social relations extend into the invisible sphere.
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 lives. This includes furthering their material welfare and interests, and thus entering what we consider to be the political field. It reflects a worldview that has persisted for centuries and continues to guide people of different backgrounds – religious, social, and political – also in modern times. It shows that history counts, also in development discussions. It is time that we cease acting on the basis of an analysis that is primarily derived from an intellectual framework, shaped almost exclusively by the historical conditions of Western Europe.

History of religion matters

Let me now shift the focus to (sub-Saharan) Africa to see not only how history matters in discussing the connection between religion and politics, but also more specifically the history of religion. If we look closely we can see how the main characteristics of African religious belief as it originated on the continent itself – the indigenous religions of Africa – have been perpetuated in the imported religious traditions, notably Christianity and Islam. I am referring here in particular to the spirit orientation of African belief, its attention to the existence of evil in all its ramifications, the concomitant need for forms of religious healing, and a holistic approach to life. From a development perspective, as we will come to see, all of these are highly relevant.

Let me start with what I have called the spirit orientation of African religious belief. Historically, spirit beings are of great importance in Africa, for reasons that I have alluded to. They usually include a great variety of invisible entities, of varying importance, dependent on the specific social community that adheres to such beliefs. Ancestral spirits, for example, often hold a prominent position, but also other spirit entities. In all cases, people will regularly contact them, either directly or through some religious specialist, who – either through descent or training, or both – possesses the necessary skills to communicate effectively with the spirit world; not that different from the role that we ascribe to priests and ministers in Western churches. The spirit world is believed to be a place
of power, that is, a place from whence to derive the power to obtain one’s objectives, both good and bad. The latter is an important point: traditionally the African spirit world is itself a-moral, and its inherent power can be used by human beings in a constructive or a destructive manner. Its morality depends on humans’ behaviour regarding the spirit world. Spiritual power is used constructively, for example, if, as is often the case, it is used for healing purposes; it is not difficult to see the potential of religious healing for development or, indeed, to attain some of the Millennium Development Goals. But the manipulation of power derived from the spirit world can also be very negative, for example in cases of witchcraft accusations, that are extremely harmful to individuals and communities in Africa. Witchcraft beliefs can be found from the lowest to the highest levels of society, including – or even especially – among politicians who may use them to enhance their political power. People at the grass-roots are very much aware of the evil use of power. Mobilising the powers believed to be present in the spirit world for constructive purposes is one of the great challenges for development agents. I will come back to this point later.

Before doing so, I want to substantiate my argument by highlighting one of the most notable but at the same time one of the most neglected religious trends in Western policy and development circles. I am referring to the worldwide popularity of various forms of charismatic or neo-Pentecostal Christianity, whose common denominator is their emphasis on the power of the spirit, in this case the Holy Spirit. In Africa, too, this has been a growing trend for quite some time, which has resulted, among other things, in numerous new home-grown churches, among them very large ones, founded and led by Africans. Most of them have an international orientation, an outlook that is further promoted by the many Africans who have migrated to all parts of the world, Europe included. In other words, we see in modern Christianity in Africa a perpetuation of the historical spirit orientation of African religious belief. Yet, these are not ‘African’ churches, suitable for Africans only, as many observers like to see them. They are a contemporary expression of religious history unfolding in Africa, and increasingly also outside Africa, notably through migration, such as in Europe (ter Haar 1998). New immigrants have carried their worldview with them, as Muslims in Europe have done for
longer, including their views on the link between religion and politics. In that sense, these churches are also a by-product of globalisation and different from an older category of African-initiated churches (AICs) that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an indigenous response to the European and North American Christian missionary movement (Padwick and Lubaale 2011, pp 315-30).

Let me illustrate this with an interesting and important example of the new type of African-initiated churches: the Redeemed Christian Church of God. It was originally started in the 1950s by a poor and illiterate Nigerian peasant as a local initiative. Today, it operates in 114 countries around the world, led by a highly educated and well trained elite with a clear vision and mission. This is only one example; many more could be added. The point of interest for us is that these churches are developing new models of social and political engagement that are derived from Africa’s, not Europe’s, history, and this has implications also for development. Typically, they are models based on what Western Europe tends to see exclusively as ‘religion’ and therefore not suitable for understanding the ‘real’ world, let alone for changing it, since this is what we believe politics is for. For modern African believers, however, religious belief and practice are indispensable ingredients not only for spiritual but also for material progress and success, as they have traditionally always been.

Similarly, a holistic approach to life – another historical element of African belief – is central to the way of thinking and acting of charismatic believers. Hence development must incorporate spirit and soul, mind and body (Olowu 2011, pp 55-80). Social transformation, they believe, cannot be achieved without the personal transformation of the individual, which typically involves spiritual change. To illustrate my point: the founder and leader of one of the best known of this type of churches in Ghana, Action Chapel International, used to be a drug addict. Being ‘born again’ inspired him to initiate among others a special ministry for drug addicts in Ghana, in the belief that only if they experience a spiritual transformation will they be able to change their destructive life-style. Transforming the lives of individuals, in the view of adherents of these churches, is a first and necessary step to the transformation of society. Or, to put it in their own words, when people are empowered to discover their God-
given abilities and gifts, they can work on lasting social change, or the transformation of society.

**Transformational change**

Transformation has become a key concept in the development debate, as well as in policy discussions, implying both the need and the capacity for radical change at various levels, personal and social, and – as far as the churches are concerned – in that order. The awareness that such drastic change is actually possible, and the envisaging of a new and different sort of life, I consider one of the most helpful ideas in contemporary religious ideologies in relation to development. In the case of Africa, we can observe a historical continuity with initiation rites: the idea of rebirth has strong roots in many African societies. The born-again ideology of charismatic churches may fruitfully be seen in this light and provide a point of engagement, at least for Christian development partners in Europe. Once again: this requires serious engagement with people’s world of ideas, especially when it seems so different from one’s own in its focus, and distant from the material world, the world of politics. I say *seems*, because the question is whether this is true, since in Africa, as I have argued, there is historically no clear dividing line between the two.

It is precisely the spirit orientation of modern African believers that has provoked criticism from Western observers, who tend to see this as an escape from the real problems that bother Africa, and for which, they believe, a political solution is needed (political in the way *they* understand the term). They are particularly critical of three recurrent emphases that they have identified in the new churches: the importance of success as a Christian’s birth-right; perceptions of wealth and how to acquire it (note the derogatory label ‘prosperity churches’ often used by outsiders); and the use of the Bible and particular biblical motifs (Gifford 2004). One often quoted example is people’s concern with demonic evil, which is seen as diverting attention from more important, mundane matters, such as corruption or human rights violations. However, ignoring popular concern with evil, means ignoring the fact that in recent years there has been a growing sense among Africans that power is being used for destructive purposes, leading to a widespread sense of the omnipresence of
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evil. Exorcism becomes, then, a ritual practice that turns helpless victims into active agents through invoking the power of the Holy Spirit; they become people who are able to turn their fates from a destructive into a constructive course. Without entering into some sort of theological discussion here about whose views and interpretations are right and whose are wrong, it is important to note how African Christians are contextualising the gospel message to suit their own needs, spiritually and materially.

It is the type of solutions to the problems of life provided by these new African-initiated churches that – in clear contrast to the former mission churches – largely explains their attraction. This is itself a rather uncontroversial observation. What is more controversial is whether or not, or to what extent, politics has become spiritualised by these churches, as critics have suggested – and whether ‘implicit politics,’ as it is sometimes called, can ever have a positive effect on Africa’s political condition. This is a serious question that needs to be addressed, not least in light of the fact that in other parts of the world, too, a ‘religionisation’ of politics has been observed (Juergensmeyer 2007, pp 7-17). It underscores the point I made earlier, namely that religion – in Africa as well as in other places where religion and politics do not constitute separate fields – provides an alternative source of power which, though located in the spiritual sphere, can be drawn upon for political and material purposes. It is precisely because they are competing powers that religion and politics are always in an uneasy relationship. To those who believe in it, power derived from religion, ie from the invisible realm, is not symbolic but real. Spiritual power as real power is a concept that most secularists find difficult to grasp, and to which they, therefore, have a problem in finding appropriate responses.

This is not in any way to argue that the beliefs and practices of the charismatic churches are beyond criticism; that is not the issue. The issue is that we are dealing with new realities concerning Africa that compel us to look at them – as far as we are able – from the perspective of the people concerned. In my view, this requires that we take seriously the proposition of these churches that inner change may lead to social transformation, and that spiritual progress will lead to material progress. This is a point of view which is in conformity with current ideas about the importance
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of human development as an encompassing project, and as the result of a process. It is notably different from the tendency to discuss development in terms of practical results to be achieved in a set period of time.

Let me illustrate this processual change with an example taken from the Redeemed Christian Church of God, which (like others) is grappling with these issues. The RCCG is much preoccupied with evangelisation, in the belief that when a sufficient number of influential citizens in high and low places have been transformed, as a result, transformation of the polity and society is bound to follow (Olowu 2011, p 75). At the same time, the church reflects on the need to raise member consciousness to work for improved social, economic, and political conditions. They do this primarily through large fellowship meetings, where thousands of pastors congregate to discuss, for example, the church’s role in political engagement. This is a typical example of ‘implicit politics,’ as the RCCG aims to develop a programme of social and political action, driven not by political crisis but by the tenets of faith. In thinking about these options, they make a distinction between hard and soft targets (ibid, p 76), with a clear preference for the latter. Soft targets are those that are closest to their faith principles and are not likely to provoke the anger of governments, even corrupt governments. They include eg educational and health programmes, or collaboration programmes with local governments to improve community schemes. Hard targets would be things like constitutional or electoral reform, and other programmes targeting the state. The community-oriented approach that seems to be favoured by the ‘soft target approach’ may well be seen as conforming to what we sometimes refer to as ‘politics from below’ (cf Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2010).

The difference between this and the explicit politics more common in the West, of a more confrontational nature, is obvious (cf also human rights approaches, see ter Haar 2011b, pp 295-314, esp 306-7). Yet, it seems to me that the only way forward lies in our willingness to reconsider our own paradigms for improving the world. We do not have to abandon them, but to expand them in such a way as to incorporate models derived from a different history, one in which the relation between religion and politics has been shaped by a different worldview. In Africa, this means accepting the ‘open frontier’ nature of African worldviews (Walls 2002,
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Religion itself, I will continue to emphasise, is neither good nor bad, similar to politics. Both can be used – and are, indeed – for good and bad, or for constructive and destructive purposes. In both cases, the challenge is to engage with them in such a way as to mobilise their constructive potential. We have to acknowledge the fact that religious believers have access to a form of power that non-believers lack, and one which, if well directed, may further development in the broadest sense. There are many examples of this taking place, particularly when people are not dependent on foreign interventions.6

Today, there is a growing debate in Europe about the need for new paradigms in development thought. In part this is inspired by such practicalities as dwindling budgets and decreasing support in traditional donor countries (such as in the Netherlands). But it also reflects awareness that for effective development cooperation to occur, it is necessary to mobilise every available resource, including in the realm of religion, to touch the full range of human life. Hence, concepts such as ‘spiritual capital,’ ‘spiritual investment,’ and ‘spiritual empowerment’ have been introduced by myself and others with the aim of including that elusive dimension that to many Africans (and others in the non-Western world) constitutes a real presence and power. Spiritual capital is generally subsumed in the broad category of social capital, a concept used in development circles to designate the great variety of ways in which people connect with one another to engage in activities that may be described in terms of the common good. As a sub-set of social capital, spiritual capital may be defined, for
present purposes, as *people’s ability to access resources believed to reside in an invisible world, which can be mobilised for the common good.*

I have argued in this article that people in Africa invest in their relations with spiritual entities as they do in those with their fellow human beings, with a view to improving the quality of their lives. This is a form of *spiritual investment* that can be compared to financial investment: a person who invests capital in the invisible world can expect to profit from it, in the visible or material world, just as a financial investor ultimately expects a material benefit. The principle of investing in the invisible world is clearly a feature of the new churches discussed above. The element of reciprocity in social relations, commonly associated with social capital, is extended by religious believers to the realm of the invisible. In the same way that people invest in their relationships by offering each other gifts – in the expectation of future reciprocity – religious believers, too, invest by making offerings in the spiritual realm – in the expectation of future returns. Investing spiritually as well as materially is entirely logical from the perspective of a worldview that distinguishes, but does not separate, the material (or visible) from the spiritual (or invisible) realm of life.

Finally, from a believer’s perspective, *spiritual empowerment* is an effective strategy, as it opens up alternative avenues to achieve what is often referred to as the ‘good life.’ Spiritual power may be described as ‘enabling power’ (Anderson 1991, pp 65-74). It enables people to take control of their own lives by reference to an invisible world inhabited by spiritual entities, in the form of gods, deities, personalised spirits, or impersonal spiritual forces. It is in this vital and dynamic characteristic of African religiosity that I see an important opportunity for Africans’ self-empowerment in the process of development. Spiritual empowerment as a means of transformation conveys the message that one can lift oneself out of one’s oppressive situation, with the help of the s/Spirit. Africa’s spirit-oriented traditions have been frequently employed for that purpose and have been perpetuated in Christianity, including in African-initiated churches in Europe (see ter Haar 1998).

The gap between a religious and a secular worldview may in fact be less profound than we think. The current financial crisis impels all of us
to rethink some of our fundamental assumptions about the world and the way it is governed: or, to be more precise, the forces that are believed to govern it. Religious believers generally ascribe significant power in this regard to spiritual entities of some sort – whether gods, deities, spirits or other invisible entities. Secular people may be inclined to say that spirits do not really exist. However, on reflection, it appears that people in all societies have ways of thinking about invisible forces that they perceive to be real. In the West, even atheists ascribe power to invisible forces, such as those often referred to as market forces, or to capital. Capital, after all, is an invisible entity. It is not to be confused with money or with physical objects, such as land or buildings, as these are only forms in which capital becomes visible. The important point is that in both cases, religious and secular, the invisible forces are believed to affect our material world (see ter Haar 2012).

For those who believe in it, spiritual power represents not only real power, but above all transformative power. Through their interaction with an invisible world, religious believers acquire access to a form of power that can change their lives. African Christians, for example, find numerous examples in the Bible, such as the transformation of Saul, the persecutor, into Paul, the apostle. Or, in modern history they may see the transformation of the notorious Liberian warlord known as General Butt Naked into the evangelist Joshua Milton Blahyi, who goes around confessing his sins and begging forgiveness from his victims. African religious history is full of such examples of transformational change that people believe to be the result of the Spirit. They become evident, for example, in the life histories of religious leaders in Africa, who are often considered great prophets or healers.

Power, by its very nature, will always be ambiguous, whether derived from religion or from politics. It becomes either a blessing or a bane in the hands of human beings.

Notes
1. This is the central approach taken in my latest book, ter Haar 2011a.
2. Three out of the eight MDGs pertain to health issues: MDG 4 (reduce child mortality), MDG 5 (improve maternal health), and MDG 6 (combat HIV-aids, malaria and other diseases).
4. One of the first African prelates to realise this was the former Archbishop of Lusaka (Zambia), Emmanuel Milingo, who was removed from his post by the Vatican due to his controversial healing ministry involving exorcism. For a full discussion of the conflict, see ter Haar 1992.
5. For a fuller discussion, see ter Haar and Ellis 2006, pp 351-67.
6. Some illustrative examples can be found in Tyndale 2006.
7. A documentary about his transformation was shown at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) 2012, entitled *The Redemption of General Butt Naked*.

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Choice has always been a privilege of those who could afford to pay for it.

*Ellen Frankfort*

I recall an anecdote shared by a youth participant from a recent meeting, wherein the gathered young people were asked by a peer, “What is common between Gandhi, Vivekananda, Gurunanak, Jesus Christ and Mahaveera?” A few seconds of silence followed, after which one young person apparently answered, “They were all born on national holidays.” Laughter apparently was the collective response to this comment, and our response was in no way different when we heard it again. Layered in the laughter, however, I find a representation of society and a general perception that ‘faith’ and faith-based communities are not really concerned with issues that matter most to society.

To our ongoing conversation of ‘faith in civil society; religious actors as drivers of change’ I would like to bring the experience of the Gandhian movement in India, of individuals and institutions inspired by the life and message of Mahatma Gandhi who have played a pivotal role in post-independent India. Their faith often translated to leadership, a leadership that made freedom a continuing possibility not only for a nation, but for her most disadvantaged citizens. Encompassed in this effective framework was concrete action for lasting peace, service for the most vulnerable, and conscientising of society as a whole. All of this was essentially rooted in deep spirituality and in an abiding faith that was drawn from the religious-cultural heritage of the Indian subcontinent. To quote Gandhiji himself, “At the back of every word that I have uttered since I have known what
public life is, and of every act that I have done, there has been a religious consciousness…” (Aram 1974) This interpretation served also as the common thread that bound individuals and institutions in a movement with their focus on ensuring societal change.

This article will revisit and discuss the:
- emerging spaces for partnership and societal transformation;
- conceptual contributions that Gandhiji presented to India and the world: *sarvodaya* and *anthyodaya*; and
- experience of the Gandhian movement in pursuing development with a human face.

**Emerging spaces for partnership and societal transformation**

For many, including me, peace and development are two sides of the same coin, peace the *end* and development the *means*. This dynamic and interconnected relation between means and ends, development and peace, is finding a larger audience today. It echoes not only in our global map of continuing challenges – poverty, hunger, disease, women’s rights – but also in global efforts in co-constructing responses. We know that if we do not address and overcome these development challenges, we cannot really experience peace as a society.

The desire for partnership therefore stems out of this need to develop *high impact and re-imagined solutions* for fundamental problems that endanger human development and, hence, peace. If one looks at the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – a promise made to free people from extreme poverty and multiple deprivations in 2000, by 189 nations¹ – one finds yet again the importance placed on development, the emerging space for all to be engaged, and an investment of the world’s wealth more consciously.

More trust, distinct strengths, increased understanding of how communities respond to co-delivered development solutions, and mutual literacy have given governments, civil society – including religious communities – and all concerned reason to work together. The partnership space is fast expanding within and beyond national governments, UN agencies, faith-based organisations and others. What we need to do, therefore, is invest time and resources to fully realise this potential
in ensuring human development. For governments and civil society, including religious communities, have not completely accepted and adapted their thinking and working in this new and emerging space. The amazingly frequent transnational, local–global connect, and the ‘value’-inspired means–ends matrix is what faith communities bring to this human development partnership.

It is also in this emerging space that creative contributions and broader human development approaches, such as Amartya Sen’s Human Development Index, hold our attention and reason to partner and work together. Professor Sen defined human development as a process of *enlarging people’s choices and enhancing human capabilities* (the range of things people can be and do) *and freedom*, enabling them to live a long and healthy life, have access to knowledge and a decent standard of living, and participate in the life of their community and decisions affecting their lives (eg Sen 1989).

In this backdrop – defined by the needs of people, the intrinsic relationship between development and lasting peace, more trust and mutual literacy between and among stakeholders – I find constructive interventional spaces for partnership and societal transformation. This opportunity we must seize, because dividends of development can lead to peaceful co-existence, globally and locally.

**Conceptual contributions that Gandhiji presented to India and the world: Sarvodaya and anthyodaya**

A people that values its privileges above its principles soon loses both, said Eisenhower in his first inaugural address on January 20, 1953. Gandhiji saw in the momentum of the freedom movement in India an opportunity for personal and collective transformation, where the privileged could serve as trustees for the wellbeing of all (Guraswamy 1985), and the less privileged supported in their life journey and forward movement. What Gandhiji envisaged therefore was a double revolution for the country. First, a revolution for political independence through *satyagraha*; second, a non-violent social revolution to build a truly free and equal society, which he called *sarbodaya*.
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Sarvodaya, a word coined by Gandhiji – sarvam (all) and udayam (awakening/rising/progress) – gave us his view of the enabling role of society, where everybody’s awakening and progress was nurtured and valued. The second concept he developed was anthyodaya, which captured his drawing of societal attention to the care and progress of the most vulnerable (anth last/least). Through these two concepts, he presented to India and the world the direct relationship of peace with social justice and human development. Thus, I infer that if one were to aspire for sarvodaya, progress of all, then anthyodaya would be the first and most critical building block. Learning to appreciate the many gifts of life is a vital phase of humaneness. The sensitive humane person is able to appreciate the mutuality that transcends generations and relate that mutuality to one’s own times (Dale 1974). These two concepts have transcended generations, and through them Gandhiji gave his generation and mine a means to realise development (within and without) with a human face.

Pursuing development with a human face

An area where there has been a lot of soul-searching recently is the way development solutions are delivered. Considered in tandem are the collaborative and distinct roles of government and civil society. We know that many of the development challenges, including extreme poverty, violate human dignity. This ethical imperative is what Gandhiji explored and expanded further when he said, “Faith does not admit of talking alone, it has to be lived!” He saw constructive and corrective action as extensions of inner faith.

Ms Guiliana, a distinguished speaker at the silver jubilee celebration of Shanti Ashram, said, “Peace-building is as much a spiritual journey as it is a political, social and educational process. It is first of all an attitude of the heart and a principle by which we abide in our personal life.” Many spiritual masters agree: “Peace comes from within,” says the Buddha. “While you are proclaiming peace with your lips,” says Francis of Assisi, “be careful to have it even more fully in your heart.” Mahatma Gandhi echoes quite the same thought: “Each one has to find his peace from within.” (Taliana nd) This understanding of peace, and its relevance ‘within’ and its expression ‘without’ in concrete social action, is what the
Gandhian movement chose as its marga, its path, for realising human development.

It will be worthwhile to revisit the Gandhian experience and the integrated model of development that it helped evolve. As I stated earlier, the movement brought together individuals and institutions in an informal way, but with a deep sense of mission and purpose. They traversed India from east to west and from north to south. They addressed on a priority mode social challenges, like caste and gender divides; economic and livelihood problems, through newly imagined poverty solutions, business models, vocational training, mass production through village industries, and the diversification of work force; political instruments and the democratisation processes through constitutional amendments and people’s movements. In other words, the agenda included work for social, economic and political empowerment. I will share the experience in an indicative way through two examples:

In the social space: Bala Shanti Programme, Shanti Ashram

From the South, let me share the work of Shanti Ashram, where I work and serve. The programme for children is called the Bala Shanti Programme and is currently celebrating 22 years of dedicated service to vulnerable children. Inspired by Gandhiji’s vision of sarvodaya and anthyodaya and as part of the programme, kendras (centres) were started in the remote rural villages to enable children from poor families to have access to education, nutritional services and health care. Thousands of children have graduated from this pre-school programme. In tandem, field experience and interaction with the service communities has led to the conceptualisation of many more innovative programmes to keep children in school, and also improve their health, nutritional and educational status. Continuous monitoring of the children at the community level has given a sensitive viewing of the continuing challenges and needs of children. The repository of knowledge and learning generated from the programme assists governmental and non-governmental institutions across the country to fine-tune their reach and impact amongst vulnerable children. In 2011, the Ashram itself reached out to 83,000 children.
Recalling the inspiration for the programme, Mrs Minoti Aram, a founding trustee of Shanti Ashram, says, “We had just dedicated to the nation a time-bound, targeted adult literacy programme called ‘Operation 100 percent.’ A sense of satisfaction permeated our hearts as nearly 18 months of hard work culminated into a constructive solution. After all, we still remember when India won Independence, less than 15 percent of India could read and write. But I soon realised that we could not stop with this, our real work must be to address the problem at its source, that is to start working with vulnerable families even before their children went to school (the pre-school age-group) and prime them for the educational journey. By doing so, we give the child a hopeful start to life and the family support to overcome injustice and marginalisation.”

The programme believes that the vulnerable situation of the children arises from:

- poverty and limited educational opportunities at family-level;
- social distance and the community setting of deprivation; and
- lack of synergy and follow-up in the programmes implemented for vulnerable children.

The learnings from the programme point to a few challenges seen more often amongst families below the poverty line:

- struggle to provide the minimal financial requirement for school;
- lack of parental exposure to educational institutions and hence the limited support at home available to first generation learners;
- poverty-related issues, including hunger, living environment, lack of access to sanitation facilities and increasing distances to centres of higher education;
- social challenges, including alcoholism and gender discrimination;
- the fact that many of the services towards children stand alone, i.e. the child and his/her family have to interface at many levels to access different services.

Every child is a promise, a sacred gift, and a living sign of the present and the future (Arigatou Foundation 2008). The Ashram’s work therefore positions the challenge before us: How do we empower children, protect
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them from the scarring impact of poverty, and enhance their innate ability for hopeful and positive living? For as we commit ourselves to realising their inalienable rights, we also give our children the opportunity of seeing the meaningful interface between rights and responsibilities. Every year, about 14 million young children are dying in the developing world, a great majority because of six major illnesses. These deaths are so unnecessary! The methods of prevention or treatment are tried and tested, available and affordable, but they have not been put at the disposal of those who need them. The bridge has not been built between what science knows and what people want. This analysis obviously draws on a large body of work in Child Health (Nyi 2001). The *Bala Shanti Programme* is one such bridge that has allowed thousands of children to walk towards a life of dignity, choice and progress.

*In the economic space: Self Employed Women’s Association, SEWA*

From the north, let me share the experience of SEWA which has brought together 1,500,000 rural women from the unorganised sector. It was registered as a trade union in 1972. It considers itself an organisation of poor, self-employed women workers.

SEWA’s founder, Ela Bhat, in one of her speeches said:

Mahatma Gandhi saw the village economy as the key to nation building. He believed that by closing the distance between producers and consumers, by meeting local needs with local skills, one strengthens the economy, one strengthens the community, and one lays the foundation for a society that is fair and equitable because it is accountable at every level. I consider women’s participation and representation an integral part of the development process. Women can bring constructive, creative and sustainable solutions to the world.5

The work of SEWA has been pioneering in that it has not only demonstrated successful social mobilisation of vulnerable women, but also innovation in solution delivery (for more details you can visit their website [www.sewa.org](http://www.sewa.org)). SEWA Bank and the SEWA movement complement one another in achieving the overall goal of reversing social exclusion of
women and restoring economic independence. Today, they have a diversified portfolio of viable people-centred solutions. Quoting Ela Bhat again:

Poverty is a form of violence perpetuated with the consent of society. Poverty strips a person of his or her humanity, and poverty takes away their freedom. Nothing that compromises a person’s humanity should be acceptable. Peace is about restoring balance in society.

In summary one could ask, what then is part of this experiential model that has emanated from the timeless concepts of sarvodaya and anthyodaya, and how does it serve as a driver of change? It does so, I feel, by incorporating the very elements that make India what it is and what Gandhiji interpreted for us all. I list a few from my work and observation:

- acknowledgement that the individual good is contained also in the common good;
- spiritual motivation that can and must be accompanied by social action (karma marga);
- coming together of religions in a framework of mutuality and equality (sarva dharma samanthva) helps solve human problems that cannot be solved alone;
- faith and reason interfacing to ensure human progress, freedom and peaceful co-existence;
- conscientised leadership so that the most vulnerable are always included when development is envisaged;
- services that are representative of the diversity of societal needs, particularly of women and children; and
- integrated approaches, be it body-mind-soul at the individual level, or spiritual-social-economic-political at the collective level.

To quote Henry James on mature criticism:

To criticize is to appreciate, to appropriate, to take intellectual position, to establish in fine a relation with the criticized thing and to make it one’s own. We have little need for sophisticated irresponsibility.

For many decades, the secular and the sacred worlds have invested time in criticising one another, sometimes irresponsibly, without interacting
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enough. The evidence is in front of us, high synergy societies⁶ achieve more together. To quote Henry James again:

the route ahead to maturity is not always easy to travel. It means experimenting with wider and wider relationships receiving occasional rebuffs. It means developing a skillful balance between dependence and independence. Learning when you should go it alone and when you should work with others. It means neither over-valuing or under-valuing conformity nor non-conformity.

We need to have faith in the ‘noble art of conversation’⁷ and get together, so that we understand in each other’s presence how faith within civil society is transforming religious actors as drivers of change.

Notes
1. UN Millennium Declaration, UNDP website www.undp.org
2. Marga means path in Sanskrit and many Indian languages
3. Bala Shanti Programme Archives, Shanti Ashram, 2011
4. www.sewa.org
5. Sarvodaya or Sarvanasha: Silver Jubilee address by Dr MS Swaminathan, Shanti Ashram Archives
6. Inaugural Address by Prince Hassan Bin Talal, Jordan, World Conference of Religions for Peace

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On faith and politics

“Please, please don’t say anything negative or critical about Islam. It is your faith!”

Such were the words of my late mother, as I decided to embark upon the journey of studying the tensions in my part of the world – the Middle East – between religion, governance and human rights for my Doctorate. These three issues were structuring the dynamics of our lives, whether in terms of local and international politics, social issues or even economics. Whether it was in our micro family or within the entire region, religion, in this case Islam, was it. Having worked on and with non-governmental organizations, dealing with the extremely tricky subject of human rights for several years, I felt it was inevitable that at one stage, I had to critically examine why it was that religious arguments seemed to be the ones that all protagonists – whether those governing or those in opposition – were bandying about, and why it was that women were so symbolic a terrain of contention between all these – largely – males.

I also came across some academics, particularly Western ones, who were far more comfortable when dealing with the Middle East, to lump people and ways of thinking together into certain simplistic categories, such as ‘fundamentalism’ (eg ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ as part of religious fundamentalism). Some of my activist colleagues, on the other hand, were equally attracted by this simple process of categorization – or naming – which made ‘the enemy’ easier to label and distinguish. The resulting
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thought process goes thus: religious fundamentalism is anti-democratic and anti-women; thus, religious fundamentalists are enemies of democracy and women’s rights; thus, anyone arguing about/for religion is against democracy and women’s rights. So the solution is to not engage with religion, at all. Such people, as ‘non-democrats,’ cannot be engaged in the struggle for democracy. The solution to all the world’s ills was: if you must have religion, then keep it personal.

At the same time, politics is part of everyday life. Who says that the higher price of flour, or a loaf of bread, determined because global markets were allowed by legislators/policy makers to become greedy without any limits, is not a political issue? So when it came to faith, why was that ‘just’ personal? Those who speak in the name of religion do not do so ‘personally’; they create entire agendas of governance, economics, culture, and social interaction, based on their understanding of what is religious. Millions are swayed by these agendas; indeed, millions vote on the basis of such ‘religious agendas.’ Surely, voting is an act of democracy, so how can one afford not to actively own this agenda?

Studying the work of women of faith, representing different religious traditions (see for example Karam 2000 and Apawo Phiri et al 2000), and working with communities of faith, teaches you a number of important lessons. Not only are women of faith the bulwark of faith-based services – forming, in some instances, over 90 percent of basic service providers in religious communities – but whether Traditional African or Chinese, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Baha’i, these women of faith see a huge difference between the spirit of their faith and the practices done in the name of their religion.

Many of these women, through their remarkable intellectual endeavors and activism in both public and private domains, seek to reclaim their religious heritage. They reinterpret the understandings of religion, such that faith becomes central to practice, rather than as in the current paradigm, where the religious institution is the focus of practice and its sole interpreter. Part of the significance of this work is the affirmation of the fact that far from being solely a tool of women’s oppression, religion is a fundamental aspect of the struggle for human emancipation, and with it, for women’s rights. There is no way that this process of reclaiming the
religious can take place by ignoring religion and castigating or alienating those who would speak in its name, or indeed, assuming that only the religious institutions represent the ‘religious.’

Events in the Middle East continue to inspire us and are indicative of the fact that to be a believer in human rights, in democracy and in feminism, one has to appreciate how the religious character is as much a part of the struggle to understand one’s self, and the identity of being religious per se, as religion is part of the social, economic and political fabric of our societies. That is an understanding that no politician, caught in the web of fighting for political power, in the midst of conflicting ideals, would be able to explain.

In addition, there is an increasing body of literature pointing towards the realization that one can be a person of faith, and a feminist, at the same time. Religious feminism, including feminist theology, is a lived reality, borne of the struggles of women of faith for their rights – with their faith as a constructive part of that struggle.

Ten to twenty years ago, the confluence of religion and mainstream political activism was deemed by many scholars and politicians alike to be at best, a ‘lack of awareness of secular realities.’ Today, religion and politics are the stuff of many a graduate course in almost all universities, not to mention how they adorn the headlines of plenty of books and publications. Religion and politics, the sacred and the political, and several other variations of the same theme, is definitely ‘in’ (see especially Rubenstein 1987; Benavides and Daly 1989; Berger 1999; Norris and Inglehart 2004). And for good reason. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union came a near eclipse of the grand political meta-narratives of communism and socialism. Left alone as supposedly the victor, liberalism eventually found itself stranded on the murkier shores of globalisation. The latter are awash with hypocritical and morally corrupt political regimes, serious global economic disparities, global warming and debilitating effects on the environment, armed civil conflicts, and with transnational acts of terrorism as only icing on the cake.

Ringing in the collective global ears are the mantras of charismatic religious personas, and the ethos of religio-political parties working simultaneously, it would seem, on the mind (providing new mobilising
ideologies), and the body (serving many people’s economic welfare in the form of education, health services and even pension plans in some countries). Whether it is the Christian Coalition of the US playing a strong role in the election (and governance decisions) of the Bush Administration, the Hindu BJP Party in India ruling for many years and now in opposition, or the ongoing influence of Iranian religious clerics in the political decision-making, the fact is, religion and politics are today’s most well-known bed fellows.

Where the United States boasts the Christian Coalition (see eg Eck 2001; Danforth 2006), mainland European countries in the 1990s and first years of the 21st century hosted a re-emergence of rightist political thought – the kind championed by French Le Pen, and Dutch Pim Fortyn. Even where the star of the respective figureheads faded, much of their political rhetoric, which appealed to some of their economically disgruntled populations, was incorporated into mainstream political discourse. The present-day campaigning discourse of Nicolas Sarkozy attests precisely to these dynamics.

Martin Marty (2005, pp 161-162) sums up the relationship in the following lines:

That division of life into spheres worked better when religion was more credibly viewed as a private affair. Today, while it certainly has not lost its personal and private appeal, religion is highly public. It is evident in the prosecution of war and peace, in violence and reconciliation. One confronts its images in the arts and entertainment world. In any case, it certainly is no stranger to politicians in a world where “faith-based” enterprises are not confined to the United States.

So where does this leave us? Clearly with a need to re-evaluate the ways in which religion is understood, the varied protagonists thereof, and the actions that need to be undertaken to deal with terror. But to concretise what is being argued for here, let us use political Islam, or Islamism, as an example.
Political Islam/Islamism – an Arab case study

Islamism’s emergence in the 1980s in the Arab world appeared to grab Western headlines, with events such as the assassination of the Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat, and variations of kidnappings, bombings, and armed conflict in Lebanon, Egypt and Algeria – to name but a few. Almost since the 1980s then, political Islam was perceived in the Western public consciousness as synonymous with violence. This impression has almost been stamped by a searing rod in Western collective consciousness by unfolding events in the Arab world, together with ongoing bombings and attacks elsewhere (ie the Paris subway bombings, US Embassy attacks in Nairobi and Dar es Salam, World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, followed by Bali, Madrid, London, Glasgow, and so on). Needless to say, the conflict between the two Palestinian factions of Hamas and Fateh, as it unfolded in the occupied Palestinian territories, has done nothing to enhance the image of political Islam.

Islamism is an extremely diverse stream of political thinking, which in and of itself is only one of the many political ideologies within the Muslim world. In fact, this is but a fraction of the different forms of social and political mobilization for social change that take place among Muslims in general – and certainly amongst Muslim communities in the Western hemisphere.3

Various authors have analysed political Islam (Kepel, Roy, Esposito, Piscatori, Halliday, Marty and Appleby, Abdel Malek, Norton, Tibi, Voll, Hunter, and Sivan, to mention but a few). Often, terms such as Islamic fundamentalism, salafism, jihadi, and Islamic radicalism have been used to explain the roots and objectives of all of these movements. Much debate took place, particularly in the late 1980s and 90s, about appropriate nomenclature. For the context of this paper, suffice it here to say that the term Islamism is considered more appropriate to describe a continuum of movements, which have a quintessentially political agenda, revolving around Islamising (rendering more Islamic) the structures of governance and those of the overall society. Shari’a, or the compendium which is Islamic laws, are considered by many Islamists to be a key way of bringing about this Islamization as a tool for social change.
For many Islamists, Islamisation as a political agenda is a means to bring about justice – politically, economically and socially. To be an Islamist, it is by no means enough to be a Muslim, nor is it even sufficient to be devout in your private life. Rather, an Islamist must be committed to active public engagement in the quest for a more Islamic (read: just) society. All Islamists will share this ultimate aim.4

But what constitutes an ‘Islamic’ (or just) society, or Islamic governance? And what methods should be used to achieve this aim? These are amongst the most important questions around which Islamists will differ (often radically and, as we see in present day Afghanistan and Iraq, often violently) from each other. There is no homogenous Islamist entity. Thus, not all Islamists are alike, and there is a serious misrepresentation when they are all lumped together as either ‘fundamentalists,’ ‘fanatics,’ or ‘terrorists.’ The latter obscures the significant differences within Islamist political thought and praxis.

‘Moderate’ Islamists5 maintain that change will come about only through long-term education, social and economic engagement, constituency building and advocacy, whereby increasing numbers of people become ‘followers’ and eventually espouse the political ideology cum social action package. Moderates will generally advocate for and participate in elections, and in several majority Muslim countries and societies, where this is permitted,6 they will register as political parties and organize themselves as such. One notable difference between Islamist – and even other Christian socio-political movements – and other political entities is that the moderates tend to have relatively well-defined social agenda(s), often exemplified by their provision of important social services (eg schools and clinics) in their respective communities. The latter lends them credibility and support among the various social classes (particularly the larger poorer ones) and thus constitutes an important factor in their political outreach and popularity. Moderate Islamists will generally not condone violence as a means to an end. However, depending on the situation (eg the Palestinian struggle for self-determination), they may well refrain from outright condemnation of suicide bombings with the proviso that
the targets should be military and not civilian, and the act is considered as self-defense.

‘Radical’ Islamists, or religio-political movements, are often referred to as such precisely because to many of them, the Machiavellian ‘the ends justify the means,’ is a popular refrain. Violence thus becomes a means to what they perceive as a ‘necessary’ or even ‘holy’ end. Nevertheless, some ‘radicals’ may veer towards the moderate end of the continuum on specific issues, or during certain times. An example of the latter is the Lebanese Hizbullah (Party of Allah), which has a history of anti-Israeli struggle and became particularly notorious during the 1980s for the kidnapping of Westerners in Beirut. In the 1990s, Hizbullah formed itself into a legitimately recognized political party, ran for elections and won seats in the Lebanese parliament. Their decision to participate in electoral politics was certainly based on real politik, but it was also a choice for a relatively moderate strategy – selectively applied. Such a shift has implications for whether or not (and how) shari`a should be applied.

On women – the Litmus test

Assessing where various parties stand on the ‘question of women in the Muslim world’ provides an important insight into their ‘ideological foundations.’ The parliamentary elections in Egypt at the beginning of 2006, together with the success of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections also in 2006, witnessed a significant rise in the Muslim Brotherhood presence in Parliament in Egypt. This, together with the parliamentary elections in Egypt in 2011, have been attributed – among many things – to the activism of women members in these parties.

Although the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood does not have women in its shura (consultative) council (its main decision-making body), women are nevertheless a key part of its outreach as well as its constituency. The same applies to Hamas, which boasts a wide popularity among women as well as their representation in the newly formed Palestinian Assembly. Both as articulators and disseminators of the ideology, and as voters, women have provided the edge to the ascent of the Islamist parties in these two countries. In fact, elsewhere I have noted how it took one woman
and her team of women, to ‘rescue’ the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood from annihilation by the Nasserist regime in the 1960s (see Karam 1998).

All of these dynamics have repercussions on the extent to which these parties formulate their policies on a range of critical social issues, and will undoubtedly play a role in the interaction these parties have with those in the Western world who are calling for an active concern for women’s well-being as part of the ‘smart power’ of US foreign policy interventions (see Verveer 2012).

The decision-making and activist roles attributed to and played by women in these parties can also act as yet another significant marker in distinguishing between diverse religiously inspired political activists. Moderate Islamists for instance, have women members active in the various echelons of the party structure (and different parties have differing numbers of women in various positions within the hierarchy). These women are not hidden from view, but on the contrary, play visible and public roles (eg the AK party’s wives of the President and Prime Minister). Radical Islamists however, as a rule, rarely have women in their decision-making structures (and if they do, it would be anything but publicly done). Radical Islamists have not shied away from recruiting women to carry out acts associated with violence, whether to carry and deliver arms, or even as suicide bombers. The distinction becomes far less clear-cut, however, in the complex Palestinian context, where Hamas too has been alleged to recruit women suicide bombers (see Victor 2003).

Today, many spokespersons of political Islam, or Islamism, find themselves, at best, on the defensive (about their diversity and their aspirations) and, at worst, cornered – and fighting.9 This may often translate into the women protagonists ‘going more underground’ or becoming less visible – while nevertheless working tirelessly to promote the Islamist causes by mobilizing and serving their communities socially and politically. It is this tendency to vilify, or alternatively to attempt to marginalize Islamists, which I would warn against, and state that it requires serious self-reflection and pause on the part of researchers and policymakers alike, as the paragraphs below will also discuss.
Women in war and women building peace

The predominant concern with the nexus of religion, violence and politics is overly dramatized, and it may have resulted in overlooking factors that led to critical sea changes in attitudes and behaviors – eg the Arab revolutions. We need to revise some critical parameters of women taking action. The following outlines the most notable of these parameters – and caveats.

Women are as culpable as men in threatening to commit violent acts, inciting violence, and actually undertaking acts of brutality and violence. They are also leaders of change and builders of communities.

Far from assuming a more ‘nurturing’ nature of women, their experiences in political processes repeatedly indicates that it is the process – which remains largely male-dominated and operates with male norms – which structures the attitudes, responses and acts undertaken by women in positions of decision-making authority. Hence, it is not always to be assumed that women alone change politics, especially not if and when they remain in the minority.

Even when women achieve a critical mass in any political or decision-making context, they do not always rise to support, overtly or covertly, other women, or women’s interests. This is due to several reasons, which vary from tactical calculations to downright disinterest (the latter more rare).

Development experience thus far points to the critical need for women and men to work together, as opposed to in separate interest-related camps. This entails reassessing how challenges are defined in the first place, as well as re-evaluating the methodology of finding solutions, and making important allies across the political and gender-segregated spectrum.

There are current ideological fault-lines between secular women’s organizations and faith-based ones. Each ‘group’ tends to work in isolation from the other. This can and does constitute a fundamental stumbling block when it comes to much needed strategic alliances.

It remains overly simplistic to assume that one group of women (or men) from the Western world, will be able to ‘help’ others in the non-Western world, to overcome its challenges. The perspective of the West extending ‘a helping hand,’ whether in the name of ‘noblesse oblige’
(otherwise known as the “White man’s burden”), or ‘freedom,’ has already created centuries of resentment and failures measured in human lives.

Preventing misunderstandings, or even anticipating positive social change requires, as a basis, that women ally themselves with men, and with their counter-parts in the faith-based movement, to challenge stereotypes, and create critical ‘spaces of communication.’ The creation of such strategic alliances requires clarity and distinctions to be made as to the precise nature of the terrorism in question (what specific tactics), and the reasons behind its emergence, as well as whom the protagonists are. Moreover, these strategic alliances have to be built on a level playing field, and not, as can be evidenced in some literature on providing handouts.

Reflecting on the unfolding revolutions in the Arab region

Remarkably, even though we are now increasingly lamenting population increases in many debates about climate change and diminishing planetary resources, it has been possible to overlook the fact that part of this demography was a youth bulge – which many saw as a predominant cause for concern only. This concern was articulated variedly, but mostly in terms of the following (oversimplified) equation:

\[ \text{Unemployed youth} + \text{poverty} + \text{a healthy dose of sense of indignity and injustice} = \text{higher potential for terrorism, drugs and violence.} \]

We failed to grasp the possibility of a radically different (and equally simplified) modern-day equation:

\[ 60 \text{ percent of the population (youth - with a large majority of girls and women among them)} + \text{access to social media and cell phones} + \text{a healthy dose of a sense of indignity and injustice long shaped by an active agenda for social change which is religiously inspired or touched in some way} = \text{revolution.} \]

These revolutions are spearheaded by the young, who used social media to ignite the revolution. Yet, there was a time, when some of the regimes in the desperate throes of survival, shut off the Internet and cell phones. Still the revolution continued, and grew beyond the national borders. How? Because the 24/7 satellite news coverage, combined with the courage and creativity of young demonstrators – male and female – risking their futures and sacrificing their lives, as well as the anticipation of further degradation resulting from poverty and austerity measures.
announced by despised regimes, in different ways, propelled remaining generations to revolt.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the largely Western discourses about the unfolding revolutions has been the constant articulation of the fear that now that the (autocratic) regimes are toppled, the Islamists (read: terrorists) are bound to take over and create Islamic/shari’a-run states – ie the Iranian revolution revisited. The reason this is frustrating is because it continues to see developments in the Arab region through the same prisms, which were used to sustain autocracy in the first place. Moreover, this perspective also turns a blind eye to the revolution in consciousness which has effectively taken place.

It is important to be concerned about which forms of political systems, actors, or even policies evolve. But more important is that the revolution has already resulted in the single most important contemporary change in Arab consciousness: retrieving a sense of dignity. Fashioned by the young, this dignity is successfully conducting other revolutions. This sense of dignity is powerful in its multi-faceted components: continuity with a historic identity, a novel manner of articulation, and its birth out of successful transformations from oppression to freedom.

This dignity also entails a revival of the sense of responsibility and solidarity towards each other – something that had almost become extinct. There has been organization and solidarity manifested within the one country, among the different political currents (secular and religious, left and right wing) and socio-economic strata (rich, middle class and poor; rural and urban; tribal and non-tribal). This solidarity meant a continuous demonstration of popular revolt, which simultaneously served to provide security for the various neighborhoods, villages, towns and cities; organized food, medicine, sanitation and even recreation services for those participating in the demonstrations (including the elderly, children and disabled), as well as for those who remained in their homes; and withstood the most violent assaults – all the while remaining non-violent.

Since the struggles for independence in the mid 20th century, dignity is inclusive of both genders. The oft asked question is: will the women go back to their homes after these revolutions? No chance. For three reasons: because those that came out to revolt were already in the public spaces;
because since the end of the 1970s, with the rise of Islamist ideology, the boundary between ‘public’ and ‘private’ has become mythical, as women’s personal attire became political statements (see Karam 1998b); and because the very same social media which started and continues to manage the revolutions neither recognizes nor enables gender distinctions.

These are the features which we must bear witness to within the Arab region. These are the elements of a new consciousness of the Arab demos, which in turn, will shape whatever political institutions to emerge.

**Moving forward with agendas of research and action on religion and civil society**

The following points highlight elements of a plan of action, all of which amount to a key verb, or action, needed: transform.

*Transform our own cultures of development.* It is unrealistic to assume that we know it all and are usually right. But it is a grave error of Voltairian proportions – as in his infamous quote that “if we believe in absurdities, we will commit atrocities” – to assume that all development actors are culturally competent, or even culturally literate – let alone ‘savvy.’ We are not. And the cultural literacy we do have, varies widely. Many of us are mired in attempts to extricate ourselves from the clutches of a dominant secular development culture, which accuses any effort to appreciate, let alone engage with, faith and faith-inspired knowledge, as an insidious act to relativize violence and human rights abuse. Being a touch more culturally inquisitive about indigenous praxis, which is congruous to secular human rights values, would be an important step in the direction of broadening alliances for more peaceful transformations, and a creative attempt to redress some stubborn development inequities.

*Revisit the rationale behind existing alliance-building practice.* To date, a great deal of political strategies and economic outreach is done on the North-South (or West-East) axis, the implication being that knowledge and experience apparently goes one way only. Yet, countries in the South have a great deal to learn from each other, particularly where there are shared contexts and success stories. The latest revolutionary transitions, for instance, show that the experiences of the Tunisians for the Egyptians, and of both for the Bahrainis and Libyans and other Arabs, are extremely
important. Also, rather than looking only at the revolutionary trajectory in Eastern Europe or Latin America, the Turkish experiment in post-revolutionary alliance-building for women may be just as instructive.

*Appreciate the role that social media plays, but do not overdraw those reserves.* Traditional means of communication and exchange of experiences are not altogether redundant, by far. In fact, one of the interesting experiences in Egypt and Libya points to using the oldest ways of calling people to activism (literally walking the streets and shouting) – once the Internet was cut off.

*Nuance the manner in which varied forms of research about ‘the other’ are carried out.* Even those of us from the regions or countries are not impervious to missing realities unfolding under our very noses. Many of my generation had no anticipation of what the youth were up to – nor could we have imagined what they are capable of.

*Support initiatives at the communal and grassroots levels.* Often, programmes that take place at the macro levels (eg by governments, the United Nations, etc) are the ones that receive the most resources. While this is important and will likely remain so for the short term, the reality is that much of the activism and desire for change does not always manifest itself in global statements. The other side of the globalisation coin, ironically, also means that the local and regional levels are becoming important sites of protest, contestation and arbitration. Hence the need to actively and systematically target these levels, and to do so by locating and listening to the youth voices.

*Form conceptual and programmatic bridges* between the secular and the faith-based women’s networks.

*Organize systematically and deliberately to target men around gender equality and equity initiatives.* It should not only be ‘granting permission’ to men on our own terms as feminists, but we must be strong enough to listen to their terms and attempt to reach a shared compromise. We may well surprise ourselves at just how far many men – including religious ones – have come in their gender rights journey, and how willing they are to partake of a shared one.
**Rephrase the language of outreach.** There should be an implicit and explicit acknowledgement of the importance of religion in people’s lives, and no moral or political judgement on, or prejudice towards, those who wish to have religion as central in their lives. Further, there should also be a clearer respect of the positive role that religion can play.

**Monitor progress by being brave enough to invest in a relatively new currency of international development: indicators of social transformation.** Politicians, heads of development agencies, and researchers/academics still need to refine existing benchmarks to assess what specific social change is being made, as opposed to only counting which social programs are in place, and how many people benefit from them. Even if now we celebrate that we segregate the data according to sex (but sex only), the presence of social programmes and access thereto is important, but by no means sufficient. As an example of this point, let us ponder this question: if we had the most accurate data about more people with access to more social protection programmes in the Arab countries, would that have prevented the revolutions that are evolving?

I doubt it.

**Notes**

1. Dr Azza Karam serves as a Senior Advisor at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). All the opinions expressed in this article belong to the author alone, and are not expressive of the positions or opinions of the United Nations, UN agencies, staff or Member States and/or Executive Boards.

2. This figure is based on my own research after several years of culling information from various religious organizations around the world, and actual field observations from numerous communities in the United States, South and South East Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

3. For more on the transnational connections between Islamist ideology in Muslim countries, Europe and the US, and the variations between Islamist positions on a range of issues, see Karam 2004.

4. This partly explains why the new post-revolutionary formations, in Egypt for example, boast some Christian members.

5. An example of a moderate Islamist party in the Muslim world is the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin, which came into existence in 1928 in Egypt), and which has branched in different countries since, and is very diverse in its structure and organizational method(s). Today’s Hamas in Palestine is a descendant and branch of the Brotherhood.
6. Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, Algeria, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, to name but a few.

7. An indication that the Israeli withdrawal from the South of Lebanon did in fact lead to a questioning of the longevity of Hizbullah’s claim to legitimacy. Needless to say, with the Lebanese-Israeli events of August 2006, the legitimacy of Hizbullah ceased to be an issue, but it has effectively become an icon to (reinstated) Arab pride after the humiliation of the 1967 war.

8. Commonly translated as Islamic law, it is worth noting that shari‘a is not one body of text or interpretation, but rather the sum of various juridical interpretations collated over a certain course of time. Thus, there is no one shari‘a law, but a whole set of man-made laws – some of which may differ according to the specific school of interpretation followed. This would also partly explain why certain applications of shari‘a differ from one Muslim country to another.

9. Or ‘resisting’ as some, like Hamas’s Ismail Haniye (the Prime Minister in the former Palestinian ruling coalition), would have it. But nowhere was this defensiveness more evident than when Essam El-Eryan, the spokesperson for the Egyptian MB had to clarify in several media interviews, exactly what their position is and would be, pending the Egyptian revolution of January 25, 2011, thereby consistently ‘minimizing’ their role in the revolution.

10. For an overview of women’s ascendance to national legislatures, and their impact within them, see Karam 1998a as well as the 2nd edition of the same book with Jullie Ballington as co-editor (2006).


12. Curt Weeden (2003, pp 215-230) for instance, in a book with a title which itself signifies a problem (How Women Can Beat Terrorism: How Women in the U.S., Europe And Other Developed Nations Can Empower Women in Poor Countries – And Move The World Towards a More Peaceful Tomorrow), mentions 3 steps that women and men can take: “1. Use foreign aid primarily to attack poverty and hopelessness at the grassroots level. 2. Give women and women’s programmes the highest priority when deciding how to allocate foreign aid. 3. Put the brakes on population growth in places where the addition of more people increases the probability of global problems.”

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Inter-religious dialogue: The case of Israelis and Palestinians

Jeremy Milgrom

Inter-religious dialogue – meaning dialogue between people of different religions, in which they openly turn to their religions for content, style, vocabulary, goals, values, etc – is believed to be a tool for groups of people to live peacefully together and avoid conflicts, or a mediating tool in conflict or post-conflict situations. However, this presumes that those involved in this dialogue find in their religions the values that need to surface in order to avoid conflicts and promote peace, and practice these values. Despite the presence of belligerent teachings in all religions, and the record of religiously inspired violence that stretches from antiquity to this very day, enough of us still maintain the hope that religion will contribute positively towards peace and conflict resolution, and, when these conflicts cross religious lines, that religions on both sides of the conflict can and should be enlisted in the service of peace.

There can be no doubt that the contributions of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, and Desmond Tutu to the lessening of violence in the ending of colonial British rule over India, the advancement of civil rights for blacks in the United States, and the end of apartheid in South Africa are inseparable from the spirituality that was rooted in the religious life of each of these great leaders. Just as their Hinduism and Christianity, respectively, formed them and sustained them in their non-violent struggle, so, too, have modern Muslim and Jewish activists sought to find non-violent teachings in Islam and Judaism. To be sure, the record is not good: Gandhi, King, and Tutu seem to be the exceptions who prove the rule, and no Jewish or Muslim promoter of non-violence has attained prominence. Yet, the expectation that religion is a positive resource for peace continues to be generally accepted, as a first and last resort.
What benefit will readers of this article gain from yet another collection of religious exhortations on justice, modesty, charity, and compassion that are crucial for peace? When I prepared my oral presentation for the conference in Uppsala that preceded this volume, I searched for utopian themes in classical Jewish texts that would establish a Jewish rejection of nationalism and materialism, which are among the leading causes of strife; I issued a Jewish-based call for universalism and socialism that could give peace a chance. Sure, “you may say I’m a dreamer” in believing that religion could be like that; as things stand now, many would go the other way, agreeing with John Lennon that the only hope is “no religion, too.” There is the temptation, in response, to play the missionary and try to convert readers to my prophetic vision (which I am well aware is anathema in the Jewish establishment). However, I believe it may be more useful to provide a survey of the pitfalls in inter-religious dialogue in general, and particularly between Israelis and Palestinians as I have experienced it during the last three decades, so that we understand something about how and why the goodwill of participants, organisers and funders has not translated into significant results. But first, some general observations about religious functionaries and peacemaking.

Religion as inner- or otherworldly

As clergy, we are constantly tempted to avoid the risk of saying something controversial and alienating someone; it is much safer if we dig up an obscure text, preferably quoting it in a dead language that no lay person in the congregation can understand. As masters of theology, who can challenge our expertise, especially when our congregation is neither particularly learned nor committed to a religious lifestyle? When rituals are given higher value than morals, or filling the seats during worship times, as opposed to the good deeds that are performed out in the real world, religion has clearly made a choice to be marginal in the promotion of good in the world, in favour of the maintenance of social order.

This is not to belittle the calming role of repetitive liturgy, the importance of meditation, and the aesthetics of beautiful music and architecture that worshipers experience when they come to take part in communal celebration. But the salves we place on the soul – as we fill the
role of the priest – are morally neutral: they will not deter evil from being executed; when this is not addressed and challenged – that would be the role of the prophet – religion will have only done half the job. Too often do clergy take refuge in their otherworldly status, one which the powers that be are happy to yield to them. Heaven can wait, it has been said, later there will be time for soul searching, it is never too late to repent.

The big tent and the bottom line

Global religions (as opposed to tribal ones) imagine themselves to be serving all of humanity (thus, the missionary thrust to convert everyone, which some religions restrain better than others). The concern for all humanity – “We’re all God’s children” – persists, even when the activity of a particular religion focuses primarily on those who identify with it. However, the degree of commitment shown to the larger circle of humanity is often limited when the members of a religion feel their needs should come first. When the neediness of the community gets out of hand, attention paid to others begins to be seen as disloyalty. Beneath the surface of inter-religious activity there is a tug of war on the loyalty of the participants: the more they are seen to be promoting the needs of their own group, the less suspicion they will be under – and the more threatened the group feels in general, the greater their resistance to support inter-religious dialogue.

Pacification vs peacemaking: The legacy of Pax Romana

The three-letter Semitic root S-L-M, which gives us the Hebrew shalom and the Arabic salaam, also gives us the Arabic and Hebrew words for surrender. Pax Romana, the 207 years between 27 BC and 180 AD, during which there was relative tranquility within the Roman Empire, was made possible by the repressive weight of the Roman Empire which stifled resistance and kept opponents from using violence effectively, but would we call this peace? Religion often seems to function, as Marx declared, both as “the opium of the masses” and “the illusory happiness of the people.” Can we describe a situation characterised by the absence of bloodshed as a peaceful one, when it is achieved by force and without the preservation of human dignity and the basic human freedoms? Peace
implies a positive situation of wellbeing, not only the absence of warfare. Religion has been known to serve the interests of the powerful, who have enslaved the masses by preaching the divine right of the rulers to rule, and the necessity of the downtrodden to accept their subordination; this is not the positive role of religion that we will settle for.

In ‘enlightened,’ ‘democratic’ society, clergy who are routinely invited to open sessions of Parliament or Congress do not feel the same revulsion shaking hands of politicians they would have felt, had they been in the company of ruthless dictators whose hands had once been literally stained with blood. But today’s religious institutions are just as dependent on the goodwill of rulers as they were in the past, especially when favourable legislation or taxation is under consideration. Clergy may find themselves caring more about preserving their status and privileges and serving Mammon and Caesar than looking after the welfare of the less fortunate. The situation is even worse when sectarian politics are involved, and religious communities are separated along ethnic or class lines. The loss of independence that results when inter-religious dialogue seeks and receives the blessing of governments and financial support from bodies that are dependent upon them is a very expensive price to pay.

**Peace and the Abrahamic religions**

*Christianity and Islam*

Much is made of religious intolerance which sometimes escalates into religious belligerence. The latter phenomenon has plagued all three Abrahamic religions: examples include the religious wars of conquest by the Israelites recorded in the Bible, those that created the Islamic empires, and the Christian Crusades. Right-wing Christian European politicians invoke the history of Islamic expansion as an excuse to forbid the construction of minarets and the wearing of the *hijab*, and the notion that neophytes sometimes graduate from *madrasas* to weapons training is not without basis. On the other hand, there is also no lack of internal Christian militancy (eg the Oklahoma City bombing and last year’s attack on Oslo); I recall Israeli (!) radio stations playing *God Bless America* when George Bush’s invasion of Iraq began in 2003. Since the memory of religiously
inspired wars still pervades the international scene, it would behoove all
religions to determine whether their ostensible advocacy of peace is under-
mined by teachings that can be used as a basis for territorial or cultural
conquest, and to neutralise them. Inter-religious dialogue can strengthen
this demand, when all acknowledge the problem and are encouraged by
positive moves by the other side. Purists might resent this process and
see it as an admission of weakness, even fallibility, but it could also be
seen as a sign of strength, as is every act of self-correction.

Judaism and the Other
The traditional rubric for interaction with the non-Jewish world, which
dates back to antiquity, has undergone many changes over the last two
thousand years, from a time when the Other was assumed to be a pagan,
through the early centuries of the common era, when Christianity and
then Islam emerged, first as expressions of legitimate theological vari-
tions of Jewish thought and finally as rival religions, intrinsically linked
to hostile governments and cultures.

Throughout history, liturgy and rituals have provided tangible expres-
sion of Jewish attitudes towards Christians and Muslims. When the walls
of separation began to fall, and Jews sought acceptance into Western
society in the early decades of the 19th century, certain texts were censored,
discarded or rewritten by liberal streams of Judaism in order to remove
traces of antagonism and xenophobia (a famous case of this last option
being the total revision of Hanukkah hymn Maoz Tzur by leaders of
the Reform movement in Germany). While more traditional Jews were
loath to go so far as to change texts sanctified over time, they tended
to offer new interpretations that dulled the sharp edges of problematic
prayers that remained in use. In any event, no one imagined that the
venom contained in those problematic texts and practices could inspire
intolerant Jewish behaviour; after all, they were a small minority of the
population interested in being integrated into general society. Zionism,
however, which began at the end of the 19th century as a fringe ideology
with few followers and became mainstream after the Second World War,
was essentially a separatist nationalist movement; what effect would
Jewish self-determination in Israel, and increased political power in the
Diaspora, have on historical attitudes of intolerance towards non-Jews?

A new Jewish perspective: new needs, new demands

In reality, the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 has created two
new Jewish cultures, one in the Diaspora where Jews are never more than
two percent of the general population but enjoy security to an unprece-
dented degree, and a Jewish culture in Israel that is reminiscent of Biblical
Israel, where Jews are in the majority and are obsessed with creating and
maintaining a Jewish society (whatever that means – its definition is
under constant debate) but are ever fearful of internal and external forces.

Inter-religious dialogue has undergone significant change since 1948:
the religious/spiritual aspects have waned, and been replaced by political
agendas. In the Diaspora, dialogue between Jews and Christians (and only
occasionally Muslims) has largely become a forum for Israeli advocacy, and
thus enjoys Jewish and non-Jewish establishment support, while in Israel,
where the unending violence between Jews and Palestinians has hardened
attitudes and diminished hopes for co-existence, dialogue between Jews,
Muslims, Druze, and Christians (respectively 75 percent, 17 percent, 2+
percent and 2- percent of the Israeli population) is a Sisyphean effort, as
ancient Biblical and rabbinical texts are now being used as rallying cries
for Jewish privilege and to exclude, expel, and persecute non-Jews in
increasing frequency and vehemence. Inter-religious dialogue between
Israeli Jews and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, who are basically
under siege by Israel, is almost non-existent.

What is there to talk about? Two parables

On religion

Moderator: This is an opportunity to learn about each other’s culture.
Let’s start with the religious holidays that each of us celebrate.

Ami (an Israeli Jew): Imad, tell me something about your holidays, special
foods, ceremonies, etc.

Imad (a Moslem, Druze, or Christian with Israeli citizenship – the term
‘Israeli’ should include all who have Israeli citizenship, but in actual usage,
Inter-religious dialogue: The case of Israelis and Palestinians

it always means Israeli Jews, since Israel is self-defined as the Jewish state):

Excuse me, you’re on my foot!

Ami: I’m very curious, I’ve never been inside a mosque.

Imad: Your chair, the front leg of your chair is on my foot!

Ami: Do men and women pray together or are they separated?

Imad: The pain is killing me;

Ami: We Jews have suffered so much throughout history…

On peace and reconciliation

In the book *Country of My Skull* by Antjie Krog (1999) the following story appears:

Once there were two boys, Tom and Bernard. Tom lived right opposite
Bernard. One day Tom stole Bernard’s bicycle and every day Bernard saw
Tom cycling to school on it.

What do we know about Tom and Bernard? They are neighbours and
school-age boys. Reading this carefully, we realise that it only states that
Tom goes to school; does Bernard also go to school? How does having a
bicycle impact on Tom’s life? Presumably, he gets to school faster; perhaps
it enhances his self-esteem, perhaps it makes him more popular among
his peers, perhaps he picks up girls. Does the loss of the bicycle keep Tom
from attending school because school is out of walking distance, or is he
perhaps so embarrassed that he cannot bear the shame?

After a year, Tom went up to Bernard, stretched out his hand and said, “Let
us reconcile and put the past behind us.”

The long awaited breakthrough; how did it happen? Did it come from the
outside? Did his classmates shame him or entreat him? Was it a neighbour?
Was it something Bernard did or said? Or did something happen inside
of Tom? What does Tom mean by “[let us] put the past behind us”? Presumably, the history of the acquisition and ownership of the bicycle.

Bernard looked at Tom’s hand: “And what about the bicycle?”

For Bernard, the bicycle cannot be separated from its history; seeing
the bicycle with Tom keeps the hurt in the present (of course, it would
be nice to know how Bernard acquired the bicycle in the first place...). Bernard responds to the symbolic gesture of a handshake by attempting to change the agenda and have his grievance redressed.

“No,” said Tom, “I’m not talking about the bicycle -- I’m talking about reconciliation.”

There are allusions here to ‘talking’, and to ‘talking about.’ Talking is a start, but it can also run aground very quickly when there are different ideas regarding the parameters of the conversation. And there is an expectation that there will be action beyond the talk. Tom may not be interested in giving back the bicycle, and may believe that by not allowing the conversation to go there, he will be extending his control over the bicycle. Are there any circumstances under which words themselves would satisfy Bernard (for example, an apology)?

A nightmare of a dialogue

A European NGO wishing to advance peace between Palestinians and Israelis recently made great efforts to develop inter-religious dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian partners. After a few years of organising, they felt the time was right for a three day workshop they wanted to run on the future of Jerusalem. The workshop could have been held in a Palestinian hotel in Area C of the West Bank within easy commuting distance of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, thus allowing participants to sleep at home and reducing the cost of the dialogue considerably. In fact, it was held in a resort in a Mediterranean country, which meant that the Israeli participants spent two half days of additional travel, while the Palestinians spent two extra days to reach Jericho, cross the river, and catch flights in and out of Amman, since permits for quick passage via Tel Aviv, which the Israeli side enjoyed, would probably not have been granted to the Palestinians. The reasoning behind the huge extra expense and time investment was that many of the participants would not have taken part in a local workshop; what they really wanted was to spend some time at a resort abroad.

There were morning and afternoon sessions, each lasting three hours, on the three days of the meeting. Aside from the time facing each other
across a U-shaped table and speaking through a translator, there was hardly any contact between the two sides; there was no mixing during meals.

The presentation of one of the Israeli participants centered on the Holocaust: his parents had miraculously lived through it, and it was the basis of this participant’s Zionism. How relevant was this to the question of Jerusalem? While it was an authentic personal reflection that came from the heart, it did not engender dialogue. No Palestinian spoke about a personal or collective experience of suffering. Some of the Palestinians did not speak at all.

Both sides lobbied for their society’s mainstream political position; close relatives of one of the participants worked in the government: the manner of his speaking was exceedingly reminiscent, in tone, if not in content, of a foreign office statement.

There was a tremendous amount of hostility towards the other group during the separate planning session that I attended; why the meeting was held at all puzzles me; it seems as if the NGO had to pull it off no matter how poor the quality of the discussion would be.

A year and a half later, there has been no contact between members of the two sides, even though the hotel in Area C is so accessible.

In every dialogue I have been part of, some participants have been more enthusiastic than others, some have been more cynical or skeptical than others. In this dialogue, it seemed that the least enthusiastic pulled the rest of the group down and kept anything from happening. As soon as the negative tone was set, everyone just went through the paces; since there was a minimum of expectations, there was little investment and not a lot of disappointment.

A recent article by Noam Sheizaf (2012) concludes with the following observation, which may help explain the meager results of the dialogue I have been describing:

At the end, I feel that what the recent Facebook conversation showed is the futility of any form of ‘dialogue’ at this point in time. As long as the political issue remains unsolved, such contacts make both sides more angry and ‘extreme.’ The heart of the matter are the issues on the ground
– the occupation, the refugee problem – and when these are solved, or even when there are some real steps taken in the right direction, I believe that rhetoric and ideologies will change too, at least in the mainstream.

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Clergy for Peace, Israel
Inter-religious dialogue in Haiti –
a tool for peace and development

Clement Joseph

Haiti sees three large religions formally established, recognised, and accepted as such: Christianity (Catholics and Evangelical as well as Anglican Protestants), Voodoo, and Islam. It is difficult to establish how many of the population that belong to one religion or the other, much because religious syncretism is very common. Syncretism links beliefs to each other in different ways, and the religious practices of one group can be tolerated and even practiced by another. This is especially the case between Catholics and Voodoo practitioners. For example, the All Saints’ Day and the All Souls’ Day are originally Catholic holy days that are also celebrated within the Voodoo religion. Protestants are normally and formally very critical to this kind of practice, but, also some Protestant believers are secretly practicing syncretism. So, acquiring reliable statistics concerning religious affiliation is a tricky business in Haiti; a Haitian could easily be associated with two or three religions at the same time. The Islamic sector is relatively new on the scene, but it is estimated that there are about 5,000 Muslims in the country.

Relations between religions
Due to the immense economic and social distress which affects 80 percent of the Haitian population, the religious sentiment is very important in people’s worldview. Since there seems to be no concrete solution to people’s problems, they need to be nourished by the hope of deliverance by God. Many believe that only God can pull Haiti from this abyss where Satan has placed it. But which religion represents God, and which represents Satan in Haiti?

This issue is central to the understanding of the relations between the different religions in the country. Since the colonial period, Voodoo
has been seen by Christians as a satanic religion. Voodoo practitioners can testify to the numerous persecution campaigns they suffered from 1804 up to 2010, when the tremendous earthquake took place. It may be said that the most important Haitian resource is God – but even this providence is not democratically shared. Christians, especially evangelical Protestants, claim a monopoly of God, and assign to Voodoo the monopoly of Satan. Also among the Christians themselves there are serious difficulties to accept each other. According to Evangelical theology, Catholics and Anglicans are not following the appropriate doctrine to be received by Jesus. So with passion and compassion for all the lost souls, many Evangelical crusades are realised to convert them.

Voodoo came originally from Africa with the Haitian ancestors, and has thus been implanted in Haiti since the colonial period. The practitioners were first persecuted by Catholics and later on by Protestants. Voodoo practitioners and priests were burned or otherwise executed by political and religious leaders. Despite five centuries of persecution and evangelisation campaigns to slow it down or uproot it, Voodoo religion resisted and survived until today. Between 2001 and 2003 it was granted legal statute and recognised as one of the religions of the country.

The 2010 earthquake and the emergence of inter-religious dialogue

It was in this religious context that Haiti experienced the earthquake that lasted for a few seconds on January 12, 2010. I can testify that among the hundreds of thousands of people who were buried under the rubble, there was no difference between Protestants, Catholics, Anglicans, Voodoo believers, or Muslims. The campuses of all the religious institutions were filled with displaced people, and there was no possibility that faith differences could be considered in the efforts to meet the emergency needs. God was for all, merciful to all, and millions of people, representing all religious beliefs, were gathered at the ruins of the national palace to pray and ask for deliverance from this painful situation.

Already before the earthquake, there were some religious leaders who were relatively open to dialogue. The ecumenical tendency was there, but not very strong because of Evangelical resistance. However, in the
post-disaster ambience, there was a momentum to launch the process of religious dialogue, and a delegation from *Religions for Peace International* visited Haiti in order to motivate the leaders from the various religious sectors. This initiative led to the creation of the interfaith and humanitarian platform *Religions for Peace, Haiti*.

Just created, the Haiti interfaith platform was facing three main challenges:

- to continue the dialogue in order to maintain trust between leaders and to reassure the followers of each religion;
- to carefully determine the points of convergence between each religious sector in order to establish a common ground; and
- to identify areas of differences to be respected and to celebrate them as a force of enhancement provided by each religion.

While the platform was working on these challenges, it was also concerned to intervene urgently on the following aspects of the Haitian socio-political context:

*The cholera outbreak:* The platform stood up to educate and mobilise the nation to overcome the disease. About 75 voodoo adepts were murdered because people charged them with being responsible for the cholera outbreak. Religions for Peace, Haiti denounced these crimes committed by non-identified persons, required that the persecutions stop promptly, and a ceremony was held to commemorate the victims and to provide spiritual support to their families.

*Political unrest:* After the elections of November 2010, Haiti experienced a really menacing post-election crisis. Religions for Peace, Haiti worked with the protagonist to avoid an explosion in society.

*Desecration of a Catholic cathedral:* The nation was shocked by this act of vandalism against one of its churches. Some were worried that it would lead to interreligious unrest. The platform protested against the act and called upon the government to take legal action against the law breakers.

*Tense relationship between the executive and the legislative powers:* The Haitian constitution of 1987 created a semi-parliamentary regime, where power is shared between the executive and the legislative branches. This regime is new to the Haitian people and contrary to its cultural mind,
which is used to a presidential regime with all power concentrated in the hands of the President. Because of this legacy, collaboration between the President and the Parliament is difficult, and especially so because after the last presidential elections the majority of senators and congressmen represent another party than the one of the President. Another constitutional problem is that the President is the Head of the executive power, and the Prime Minister Head of the government; this situation does not encourage good collaboration between the two parties, and is, in fact, possible only if the Prime Minister remains completely submissive. In these elections, the nationality of the President was also questioned, a situation that contributed to the creation of an explosive climate. The platform of Religions for Peace, Haiti was called on to help in decreasing the tensions and to facilitate communication.

Despite the enormous differences between the religious sectors, experience has taught us that inter-religious dialogue is key when it comes to the prevention of conflict and the building of trust within the Haitian society. In Religions for Peace, Haiti, we never vote. All decisions are taken by consensus after a time of sufficient dialogue to find the points of common understanding, and the process of decision-making is always supported by deep spirituality and prayers. The reason for not voting is simple: the platform represents five distinct religious groups, out of which three are closely related (the three Christian groupings). Voting would give this group an immediate and constant majority, so to encourage and assure a space of dialogue and free expression we take our decision by consensus. Each religious group is represented by a person officially designated by the head of the sector he or she represents.

**The road map of Religions for Peace, Haiti**

The platform wants to reinforce its local institution, develop its strategic planning, and facilitate a better relation between Religions for Peace, Haiti and international organisations that are involved in similar work. The following points are addressed in order to better contribute towards the holistic wellbeing of Haitian men, women and children:
Inter-religious dialogue in Haiti

- Protection of vulnerable people, such as women and children, using seminars, conferences, and radio and television broadcasting to motivate people;
- Promotion of family values through our congregations and by using the media and public institutions;
- Advocacy for the protection and regeneration of the environment, through the promotion of a ‘green theology’;
- Prevention of conflict, conflict resolution, education for tolerance and peace through the development of dialogue between people of different zones and through facilitation of common initiatives between these groups; and
- Advocacy for the respect of fundamental human rights, respect for democratic and republican values.

The ongoing dialogue between representatives of the religious sectors ensures harmony within the platform. This harmony may lead to mutual acceptance, public trust, and cohesion among different fragments of the population. The religious leaders involved in Religions for Peace, Haiti, intend to serve their nation and to create a space where Haitians can come together, talk to each other, listen to one another and move forward with their lives.

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Religion as part of energizing the UN

Azza Karam

The World does not lack the resources to abolish poverty, it only lacks the right priorities.

(Juan Somavia)

In my region of the world, the Middle East, or the Arab world, remarkable acts of courage and bravery have taken place over the past year. I wish to acknowledge this reality. The United Nations came into being at a time of intense global changes, over 60 years ago. Since then, it has grown in size, importance, impact, meaning, and relevance. As a multilateral organization with national, regional, and international institutional outreach, the UN is unique.

As a multilateral organization which has massive human power – engaged within it as its own staff, affiliated to it in myriad capacities, undertaking peace-keeping operations in its name among many other forms – with mandates extending to each and every aspect of human and other lives and the development, rights, peace, and security thereof, the UN is an amazing entity.

As a multilateral organization which has succeeded in extending its influence and infrastructure to encompass a huge range of mechanisms, which serve almost 200 countries’ governments; which convenes, develops, deploys, plans and coordinates critical international conventions and interventions responding to human needs, the UN is unparalleled.

But the realities around the UN have changed: from a world in which nation-states made decisions to govern every aspect within their own boundaries and organized their own armies, to a world where non-state actors, various peoples, and a plethora of other multi-state bodies, proliferate. The geopolitical alliances, governance regimes, and direction of international development aid are all shifting. The very air we breathe
and the environment around us, including plants and animals, are facing drastic changes in survival patterns.

One of the many changes becoming increasingly difficult to ignore for longstanding secular organizations, is the extent to which religion is surfacing as a critical broker of human and governmental existence. This appears, at first sight, to be in some ways contradictory to the secular ethos of the United Nations system and its human rights mandate. But that would be a shortsighted perspective. It must not be forgotten that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is itself predicated upon the very values common to every faith tradition, and as such, it is not an instrument without faith, but rather, *a product of the world’s common faiths*.

I believe that interfaith harmony lies at the very foundation of human development, which, in turn, is part and parcel of the prevention of conflicts, the resolution of conflicts, and the long-term sustainability of peace-building. It is therefore timely and necessary that at this juncture of our political, economic, and cultural interaction, we address the issue of religion and development in general, and the role of interfaith harmony in forging sustainable human development, in particular.

Having said that, I believe it is also very important to highlight that within the United Nations system, there is already a long-term institutional memory of outreach to faith communities around the world. *But why should the UN reach out to faith communities?*

A study published by the World Health Organization in the early part of the Millennium provided an important reality check for many of those working in the field of health and development. According to this study, *faith-based organizations* (FBOs) provide an average of 30 to 40 percent of basic health care in the world. This figure is expected to be much higher in contexts where conflicts break out, such as in Sierra Leone or the Democratic Republic of Congo, where organizations such as IMA World Health indeed inform us that almost 75 per cent of the basic health care can end up being provided by FBOs.

We also know that religious communities are capable of unparalleled social mobilization. I refer not only to the convening capacities inherent in raising and utilizing legions of volunteers (which no other institution can boast worldwide), but they are also owners of the longest standing and most enduring mechanisms of raising financial resources. In times
where traditional ‘secular’ development is confronting its strongest set of resource challenges, these capabilities cannot be underestimated.

Given the realities of service provision, resource mobilization, and political presence, it becomes clear that being knowledgeable of the work of FBOs is necessary, if we are to take seriously the fundamental dimension of social development and social capital, particularly as we consider the imperatives of future development agendas. Thus, an informed and systematic outreach to key partners in the world of religion – which, it must be unequivocally stated, is bigger, wider and much more complicated than the world of secular international development put together – and where community service provision has already been a reality for centuries, is quintessential.

My organization, the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, has played an active role in convening and coordinating sister UN agencies, various offices and divisions within the United Nations system, to form an Inter-Agency Task Force on FBOs and the Millennium Development Goals (IATF-FBOs). This Task Force serves to share experiences of engaging FBOs in the various mandate areas, facilitate coordination amongst similarly oriented initiatives where possible, and support information sharing about and with FBO partners. In so doing, the Task Force acts as an internal capacity building and knowledge management mechanism within the United Nations system. UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNDESA, UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, the ILO, and UNFPA are some of the major organizations with formal representation in this IATF, together with UN-Habitat, UNEP, and others.

The UN Inter-Agency Task Force on FBOs: Lessons learned

What, then, are some of the practical lessons we have learned through this work with, and about, faith-based organizations in particular, and religious communities in general?

We have learned that FBOs and ‘religion’ are not one and the same. I reiterate, the world of religion is vast and difficult for us to quantify and categorize into neatly distinct entities. Religion and faith do not lend themselves to the usual normative frameworks of development praxis. This means we must be learned, strategic, and delivery-oriented in how we determine, manage, and evaluate the partnerships.
We have learned that instead of inventing the wheel as per the new development fashion, the engagement with religious communities has to be sustained, built on existing knowledge and practice, and be part of broader civil society and government partnerships. This is critical to the necessary trust that is required for such engagement. In addition, it is required as part of facilitating the ownership of national development processes by all strategic partners.

We have learned that as the United Nations, we cannot, and should not, work with only one faith tradition, nor only one FBO, or the same group of religious leaders on all issues. We are obliged to work with all faiths, several FBOs, and varied religious representatives on a multiplicity of human development needs. And we must do so maintaining the same manner of (mutual) respect, and appreciation for the respective strengths and modus operandi, as long as there is agreement on the goals of human development: human rights, peace, and security of all peoples.

We have learned that the responsibility for learned, strategic, and sustained partnerships to realize human rights, lies on all sides. As we bear our own responsibilities within the respective United Nations agencies and hold ourselves accountable to our (intergovernmental) boards, mandates and civil society partners – we expect our FBO partners to do the same with each other, and with the United Nations.

The lessons learned over the years have resulted in some interesting trends: one which argues that religion is too contentious, and that religion should not be involved in public life. This perspective is born out of a generalized view of religion which maintains sense that religious identity, deeply felt by many and yet intangible and to many, irrational, can be divisive. Those who maintain this perspective will refer to ongoing religious tensions in many parts of the world which further communalism, sectarianism and strife. They will also reference general religious conservatism around gender equality, contraception, and homophobia, to name but a few contentious human rights issues.

Another perspective encompasses those now running to embrace what has become a new ‘fashion,’ – ie that of ‘engaging with religion’, sometimes with little study of impact involved. This attitude often instrumentalizes religious leaders in particular, and sees their value as ‘rubber
Religion as part of energizing the UN

...stamping’ or adding legitimacy to – relatively less – contentious initiatives around issues such as ‘peace-building’, social cohesion, nutrition, and the environment. This outreach also argues that some faith-based actors and organizations often have access to human and financial resources, and are therefore important to involve in a world of diminishing ones. While there is value to all approaches, it remains problematic that the engagement with faith communities and representatives remains largely ad hoc and has yet to be systematically monitored or evaluated. This also means that there is no way of appreciating the implications of engaging religious leaders to endorse environmentally sensitive policies, but who may stand directly opposed to other aspects of human rights.

Thus, both trends represent challenges. We need to enhance, strengthen, and support the human rights-based culture of the UN. In order to do so, I believe a sensitivity to the impact of religion on all aspects of life needs to be diligently, studiedly, and systematically applied. This does not mean becoming apologists for any abuses of human rights. On the contrary, this would entail strengthening our arguments for human rights and dignity – from within every faith tradition.

The United Nations remains a vital and ever more necessary body, and I would conclude by echoing what the UN Secretary General Mr Ban Ki Moon himself has articulated:

I have long believed that when governments and civil society work toward a common goal, transformational change is possible. Faiths and religions are a central part of that equation.

Note
1. The following segments are taken from Karam 2010.

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United Nations Population Fund, USA
Religious doctrines and the body: Clashing notions of sexual and reproductive rights

Gunilla Hallonsten

Religious doctrines as inclusiveness and exclusiveness

My Danish colleague says: “I am a member of Metropolitan Community Church in Copenhagen.” Hmm, never heard of it, I think, and respond vaguely: “Aha, is that a new church, or?” No it is not. It is a global church that was founded in San Francisco by homosexual men who were excluded by their own churches when it became known that they were HIV-positive. They were no longer welcome, and they therefore decided to form a Christian fellowship on their own – a fellowship that is now present all over the world. They did no longer allow other people the preference of interpretation on whether they would be allowed to call themselves Christians, or worthy of being part of any religious community, or not. So, excluded, they united to form unity themselves. Their exclusion, created by a certain doctrine, was turned into the starting point of a new doctrine that would create and focus on inclusion.

I lived in southern Africa for some years, and a friend of mine is Lawrence, a priest in one of the mainline churches in southern Africa. He is married to Bongani, who is a priest in a congregation of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) in South Africa (Reid 2010). Bongani is the leader of his congregation in South Africa, and Lawrence is no longer allowed to serve as a priest in his church since he married Bongani. Two men – one white and one black – who began their relation in southern Africa before the end of apartheid – the system designed to categorise and divide people according to colour. This was a fellowship based on exclusion of others, on stigma by colour. Apartheid was legitimised by
Theological interpretation can really be about taking sides.

South Africa has since apartheid adopted the most radical constitution in the world, with equality as its principle and non-discrimination as the lead concept. However, laws can be changed, but if there is no simultaneous process of change of values among the population, modern laws are alienated from the women and men who follow what they perceive as decent and right. International conventions have positively influenced national law and practice, but international campaigns have also created unintentional reactions.

Last time when I visited my friends, I met with Patricia. She is a member of the MCC, a **sangoma** (traditional healer), black, woman, lesbian and HIV-positive. She is HIV-positive because of curative rape, which is quite common in South Africa, a gang rape in order to ‘cure’ a lesbian woman.

Human rights-based support to LBGTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, intersexual) people and women’s bodily autonomy and citizenship is severely challenged by accusations of human rights (HR) being a Global North intervention, with a universalised understanding of women as individuals without a social context. Such criticism must be rejected, but also met by the acknowledgement that no individual exists in a social, religious and political vacuum, devoid of duties. In their everyday lives, individual rights may be seen as irrelevant, while social belonging and collective rights are crucial for both identity and practical survival.

One of the greatest challenges when applying a rights-based approach (RBA) to for example women’s empowerment is to maintain that HR are universal, while simultaneously engaging in a dialogue about what rights can be claimed in a specific situation and context, and how it can be done. A practical approach is to make HR meaningful in dialogue.

Bongani is also active within the LGBTQI movement in South Africa, and has been a part of its *Policy analysis and capacity enhancement research programme* (Mkhize et al 2010). The recommendations to NGOs are:
- Challenge stigma, denial, discrimination and prejudice by addressing the values of social justice rather than simply addressing identity politics; and
- Identify and mobilise shared values across social, political, cultural and religious belief systems, and engage society in a dialogue that places sexual and gender justice at the centre of the conversation.

The LGBTQI movement in South Africa does not only defend the human right to choose whom you want to love, and how you want to love. It is also a strong expression of sexual identity and, therefore, sexual liberation. It challenges the historical societal foundations: sexual oppression and a hegemonic understanding of heterosexuality. This kind of sexual identity movement has also started the critique of sexual ‘normality’ and the patriarchal family. Their challenge comes in a time when biomedical science makes possible the dissolution of the relation between heterosexuality, patriarchy and the family’s reproduction. On the other hand, the erasing of sexual boundaries – which will dissolve the ties between family, sexuality, love, gender and power – is a basic cultural critique of the known world. When the movements slightly change the discourse from HR into reconstruction of concepts like sexuality, family and identity, they touch upon oppression and the weak spots of civilisation – and what they say will be received accordingly.

The sociologist Manuel Castells (1997) argues that the old hierarchy of gender structure is dissolving in what he calls the ‘crisis of the patriarchy’; the authority and domination of adult men over other family members is weakened. Other expressions of the crisis are the diversity of family constellations, an increasing number of separations and divorces, and low nativity. Castells sees the explanation – just like Ulrich Beck (1992) – in women’s increased economical resources, leading to their stronger position of negotiation, in turn undermining the legitimacy of male dominance. Part of the explanation is women’s increased consciousness as well. The current Western European understanding of women as equal to men, with a right to control their own bodies, questions the traditional family concept. Castells (1997) argues that we have to develop new
and changed forms of social life between the sexes, and that there is no obvious or determined tendency of development.

**Social change and symbolic power**

The definition of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) takes place in a field of power struggle, where agents with competing norms and values are the actors (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The most basic type of domination is the symbolic principle male dominance, both arbitrary and non-recognised. The symbolic violence emphasises male dominance as neutral, given and without the need for legitimacy. In the andro-centric cosmological order, biological differences between the sexes are perceived as natural. They legitimate socially constructed gender differences, and they guarantee the reproduction of interpretations and valuations. The relation of domination can be found in societal as well as social structures, integrated in our bodies (Bourdieu 1999). Such relations of dominance are reproduced in institutions such as church, school, state and family, which provide mythical-ritual processes in which boys are transformed into men and girls into women. The foundation of this social order is the production and reproduction of symbolic capital, where men enjoy status as subjects, and women status as objects.

The theory on symbolic power sees gender as a social construction, and shows how structures and agents’ habitus together maintain male dominance. Gender habitus and gender domination are, over time, embodied in a process of upbringing, a social as well as political product.

There is one feminist tradition that discusses body politics as negotiation of power:

The concept gender politics is also used referring to the struggle for the right to express a gender identity regardless of ascribed sex or genitalia; thus one form of body politics. At the core of this body politics is sexuality and the struggle for the right to enjoy sexual relations without discrimination or state intervention dictating what is normal (Schlyter 2009, p 13).

Maybe the most controversial issue of all is abortion – or, rather, the free choice of safe abortions. It questions the traditional perception of the woman’s body as meant for reproduction. If woman is given a value
Religious doctrines and the body

beyond this, if she is given the authority to decide over her own body and its purpose and thereby over reproduction itself, much religious doctrine will be challenged and will need to be diversified.

Human rights are said to be universal, but often understood as ideas from the Global North – so how can they be legitimised in a diverse range of societies? An important discussion is going on about how to combine independence and belonging, being an individual and a citizen.

My own research on HIV-positive Christians in church and society in Swaziland confirms that there are violations of individual women’s rights built into both the so-called communitarian and the modernist versions of citizenship. If groups, faith communities, churches or families that are headed by men are the bearers of human rights, this usually means that women have to negotiate their limited rights in the context of customary law. The modernist version of citizenship, on the other hand, with its focus on gender neutral individuals, tends to exclude women by placing them in a private sphere (Hallonsten 2012). Yuval-Davis contests the disembodied notion of a citizen and unveils citizenship as always gendered and situated in places, bodies, and historicity (Schlyter 2009). Thus, there is a risk that gender specific rights contribute to and cement prejudices and discrimination, while with gender-neutral rights women are at risk of being included as citizens only on the condition of being close to the male norm that reinforces or reintroduces inequalities (Schlyter 2009).

Sociological critical thinking – intersectionality

In relation to social and religious doctrines (and therefore vulnerability) it is of importance to briefly mention the feminist and sociological discourse of intersectionality (Mulinari and Reyes 2007) by which social and religious exclusion can be understood through the visualization of structural oppression and power relations and the discovery of the intersection, where various aspects of discrimination or stigmatisation meet.²

This sociological analytical methodology looks at gender/sex, class and race/ethnicity, and asks how power and inequality are part of a person’s understanding of belonging to a class or gender; it is about the understandings of heterosexuality, race, religion³ etc. All these understandings are reproducing power and inequality that will mark the differences between
‘us’ and ‘them.’ Thus, inequality is constructed in the intersection between power-structures, institutional practices and individual actions.

Regarding the significance of religion as identity and praxis, as well as the meaning and function of value systems in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights, ethical discourses about identity, authenticity and intersectionality are essential. The liberation theologian from Peru, Gustavo Gutiérrez, is working theologically with intersectionality, and he defines it as ‘conditions of insignificance’ in relation to eg economy, culture, language, ethnicity, employment, gender, and HIV. All these dimensions, according to Gutiérrez, increase a human being’s understanding of his or her insignificance, thus human dignity (Gutiérrez 2011).

Erica Appelros (2005) discusses the role of religion in intersectionality as an institution where ideology is created and reproduced with the help of power structures in relation to gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation. The religious factor itself is also a reason for oppression, just like the other intersectionality dimensions. Religious ideologies form people’s gender identities; and religious institutions have their own internal hierarchy of power that interact with other power hierarchies in society in a complex way, involving gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, class, race, and age.

Excluding religion as an intersectionality analytical tool thus creates the risk of simplifying a contextual analysis.

**Religious doctrine and socio-religious discourse**

I would claim that religion is a social factor of great importance globally, and that faith communities hold a key position as authorities when it comes to value-based issues, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), also in the case of HIV prevention. Religion can, when articulated in an authoritative way as condemning and restrictive doctrines, be an obstacle for SRHR work – but it must also be acknowledged that religion may contribute as a reinforcing and motivating power to take responsibility for one’s own life and the life of others.

Faith communities must be challenged if and when they maintain or defend discriminatory and harmful norms and practices, as when the Bishops of the Church of Sweden recommended church leaders world-
wide, in an official letter, to increase the knowledge on HIV prevention, including the promotion of condoms, to counter stigmatisation and discrimination of HIV-positive people (Svenska kyrkan 2007).

The Church of Sweden and four Latin American universities in Costa Rica, Argentina, Brazil and Colombia run a Master’s programme on HIV and Theology together. During a conversation with the university professors at a symposium in Lima, Peru (December 2011), they emphasised how issues relating to human sexuality deserve ‘real’ answers, contextual in time and space – rather than doctrines beyond time and space. Issues on the very existence of the human being, such as the ones concerning body and sexuality, demand that theologians have an interdisciplinary approach. Theology is constructed and created in dialogue, with people who are HIV-positive, transsexual, men having sex with men, commercial sex workers etc. Theology is always in transformation, and doctrines are temporary decisions based on consensus which change over time. When doctrines are no longer practicable, we search for new ones.

At the Lima Symposium, liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez argued that we have created categories of for instance male superiority that have nothing to do with God; they are created by man and therefore also possible to eradicate, to fight against. He means that whatever is meaningful to humanity is meaningful to Christianity.

Postmodern feminism deals with SRHR issues in a critical way that opens up for multitude and diversity in relation to doctrines. So, can we, based on a postmodern feminist point of view, live with different interpretations of reality, of humanity and of SRHR? Yes, and maybe there is no other option. By excluding some interpretations as politically incorrect, one risks obstructing social change. Nevertheless, we must ask whether it is possible to identify a specific essence that all doctrines on a specific topic, such as SRHR, have in common. Black American feminists say that the concept of human rights is a white discourse (Giddens 2001). And a number of African theologians claim that prior to any discussion on human rights, a discussion on human dignity and value must take place. Could that be perceived as the essence of SRHR?

Reciprocity and dialogue between North and South on matters related to theology and SRHR are needed, and there are examples of exciting
collaborative projects. The Christian Councils in the Nordic countries and in the sub-Saharan countries have for some years collaborated in the project *One Body* which aims to encourage theological reflection on HIV and aids.⁴

**Acknowledging praxis and agents of change**

The space for SRHR in the discourses of faith communities is not claimed space, but rather transformative space, and therefore sometimes contradictory, since the discourse includes official doctrines as well as praxis in the faith communities. It is of great importance that this diversity is acknowledged. One example: the Catholic nuns at Caritas in Manzini, Swaziland, some years ago had their dining hall walls practically covered with posters stating: “Condomize! Not just abstain – A – or Be faithful – B – but C – Condomize!” Thus, there are contradictory interpretations within a Church, a diversity relating to official doctrine as well as praxis. The nuns in Swaziland encountered a context with the highest HIV prevalence in the world, and this crisis transformed their understanding of a doctrine against contraceptives.

I would claim that agents of change would be those who in praxis have the capability to act upon what the doctrine reflects, and who believe that change is possible, even though it seems impossible (Nussbaum 2011). They combine a realistic approach when identifying obstacles to their work, with a realistic approach towards the possibilities for social change, adding the power of hope.

Agents of change within faith community development at grassroots level monitor a process of identifying problems and resources; identifying human needs; and having an understanding of local power structures. This is of decisive importance, since constructive processes of change must be based upon participation and authentic choices in order to make a difference. A good example is the Chinese FBO Amity foundation and its HIV prevention and awareness work among commercial sex workers at the Vietnam border, and among injecting drug users at the border to Myanmar. The Amity Foundation and the Church of Sweden⁵ work together with vulnerable groups, and last year collaboration was initiated between Amity Foundation and the Chongqing rainbow group on HIV
Religious doctrines and the body

prevention among middle-aged and aged MSM. Social and cultural factors in China contribute to a strong heteronormativity, and 87 percent of the middle-aged MSM are married and have established families. Advocating against stigma and discrimination, and creating space for the Rainbow organisation and similar organisations in the wider society hopefully leads to that the voices of MSM can be heard and listened to.  

Religious doctrines and the body not only relate to clashing notions of SRHR and faith, but also to the diversity within faith communities. Theology is of decisive importance, as it legitimates both cultural expressions and religious norms concerning gender justice and gender equality – and my assumption is that theology may promote justice and equality, building on the conviction that all people are created equal, with dignity, to live their lives in abundance.

Notes

1. Pierre Bourdieu created the concept habitus which can be described as a system of dispositions on how to act, think and orientate oneself in the social world. The dispositions are founded on experiences, collective memories, movements and ways of thinking and these dispositions generate actions.

2. Regarding the significance of religion as identity and praxis, as well as the meaning and function of value systems in relation to HIV, I would also like to mention that ethical discourses about identity, authenticity and intersectionality are essential. Meyer’s work on authenticity and intersectional subjects (2000), Oshana’s theory of relational autonomy (2003) and Appiah’s view on identity as ‘scripts’ forming narratives (1994, 2005) can provide useful tools for the analyses.

3. Religion is a social system in line with Max Weber’s understanding of race, class, gender and sexual orientation.

4. This has among other things resulted in the publication Nordic-Foccisa: One Body, vol 1: North-South Reflections in the Face of HIV & AIDS, as well as One Body, vol 2: AIDS and the Worshipping Community, 2005.

5. I want to stress that the Church of Sweden actively advocates for gender justice and gender equality and has, in ecumenical relations and networks, assumed the role of being an agent of change, challenging theologies that are counteracting gender justice and gender equality.

6. Worth mentioning is that LGBTQI organizations cannot be registered in China. The rainbow group is a small grassroot voluntary group or movement at several places in China but informal, and invisible.
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Introduction

Liv Tønnesen

The massive popular uprisings that began in 2011 across the Middle East and Northern Africa have come to be known as ‘the Arab Spring.’ Arab women from different class-backgrounds, generations and religions across the region were – and still are – on the frontlines of protest marches, fighting against the oppressive and corrupt rule of dictators, chanting “bread, freedom and social justice.”

Images of women in the Arab world taking to the streets to oust governments are hardly something ‘new.’ During national revolutions in the region between the 1930s and 1950s, women participated extensively in the same way that they are now partaking in the Arab spring. But as the revolutionary dust cleared and constitutions were decided upon after achieving independence from colonial rulers, women were by and large side-lined. The protests, which are still very much on-going in the region, are therefore critical moments to assess and follow closely the developments that will shape the position and rights of women in the states rocked by the Arab spring. It is therefore not encouraging to see that the women’s quota in the Egyptian parliament was removed by the interim military rulers, and that only two percent women were elected into the Egyptian parliament. On a more positive note, though, an early move to assuage doubts about the extent of Tunisians’ devotion to women’s rights was a gender parity law, which required equal numbers of women and men as candidates on every political party’s electoral list in the parliamentary elections. Tunisian women won 27 percent of the seats in the parliamentary elections in October 2011; the overwhelming majority of them come from the Islamist al-Nahda party.

While the uprisings against Bashar al-Assad are still very much on-going in Syria, in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen elections have been held, and constitutional reforms are being fiercely debated in the newly elected parliaments, dominated by Islamists and Salafists. These religious
groups, in which women are active participants, have been operating at the grassroots level and in civil society at large for a long time. Their electoral victory, therefore, did not come as a surprise. But although there is no doubt that they will play an important role in the political transformations taking place before our eyes, how those roles evolve will be shaped by each country’s unique social and cultural landscape as well as political and economic history. They share a commitment to Islamisation and Islamic law, but vary widely on their position on a range of political, economic and social issues, including the ‘woman question.’

During the election campaign and in its aftermath, women’s rights have been at the forefront of public debate, activism, violence and deep-rooted fear. ‘Virginity tests’ performed on female demonstrators by the armed forces in Egypt is one example. Another example is the intense debates about family law. Family law is central to the rights and position of Arab women. There is a striking similarity across both Islamic and secular Arab states as regards the system of family law; a system which was supported by colonial rulers and later reinforced by autocratic regimes. All Arab states are ruled by religiously anchored family laws (both Christian and Muslim), which follow the same pattern of inequality between men and women. It is thus difficult to debate women’s rights within the law without reference to religion. There are differences in rights in these family laws – across religions and across countries – but the laws have historically been gendered in the sense that men are legally and financially more empowered than women. Although women are regarded as equal to men in most new and old Arab state constitutions, constitutional rights are rendered obsolete when women’s rights under family laws are systematically unequal and discriminatory. Discrimination in family laws “mirror the political projects of regimes and are a reminder that law is not a neutral agent but reflects dominant power relations in society” (Karam 1998, p 235). This is related, as Suad Joseph argues, to the fact that family law is “a benchmark of feminist struggle” in the Arab world (Joseph 2000, p 20). While Islamists in Tunisia swore in the election campaign to uphold the most progressive family law in the Arab world, which prohibits polygamy, parliamentary debates dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist al-Nour party in Egypt have so far revolved around retracting a
reform from 2000 in Muslim women’s rights to divorce. Meanwhile, women activists from various ideological and political backgrounds are contemplating ways to reform the laws in a gender equitable direction, often employing religious frames.

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The co-existence of diverse populations is a highly debated and urgent issue in the contemporary world. In these debates, the Middle East can be used either as a model to emulate or as a warning example. Both the historical and present day Middle East can be – and are – utilised in such discussions. Developments in the country in the last decades demonstrate that ‘majority-minority’ relations in Syria today are both complex and contested.¹

Syria is, and has been, an area of great ethnic, religious and linguistic heterogeneity. The ethnic and religious composition of Syria is in many ways guesswork, because official statistics on such issues are not available. In 1949, all reference to religious affiliation was taken away from Syrian identity, and this principle has been upheld until today. However, an educated guess is that Christians constitute about 12 percent, divided into at least fourteen sects with the Greek Orthodox as the largest. Most Christians describe themselves as ‘Arab,’ but there are also Armenians. Besides, many Syrian Orthodox Christians regard themselves as both an ethnic and a linguistic group. Most Muslims are Sunni, perhaps 60-65 percent. Many of the Sunni Muslims are Kurds, but Kurds are also Yezidi and some are Shi’a Muslim. The Druzes consider themselves as ‘Arab,’ as do the Alawis, both of whom are Muslim splinter sects, regarded by many Syrians as special ‘ethnic’ groups. There are also various kinds of Shi’a Muslims. Finally there are small ethnic/linguistic minorities like Turkmen and Circassians.

Many minorities have clustered in specific regions, but most towns and cities today have attracted migrants from all kinds of ethnic and religious
The ‘ethnic-religious mix,’ however, differs from one region to another and from one city to another. There are no rural Kurdish or Alawite clusters in the south of Syria, and no rural Druze clusters in the north. The variety of Christian sects is greater in the north than in the south. The Druzes are concentrated in the southwest mountain region of Syria. Many have become refugees following the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights in 1967. The Alawites’ ‘original’ area is the northwest mountain region (Rabo 2011 a).

Questions of ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity are highly complex in Syria, and the use of terms like majority or minority are both sensitive and imprecise. ‘Minority’ – *aqalliyya* – is not used in official Syrian discourse. Both power holders and citizens-at-large tend to stress that ‘we are all Syrians.’ In Syria, the Ba’th party which has been in power since 1963 embraces an ideology of pan-Arab secularism, whereby all ethnic and religious differences are publicly under-communicated. The very concept minority is often said to be a Western colonial device to divide people of the Middle East into a myriad of competing groups. All Syrian citizens are said to be equal and – very importantly – all are supposed to be equally Arab (Rabo 2012). Yet, the Ba’th party was originally more successful among Syrian (rural) minorities like the Druzes, the Alawis, and the Christians, partly because it aimed to overthrow the mainly Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslim urban elite with vast interests as landowners in the countryside. Since the Ba’th takeover in 1963, the ethnic composition of party members has both broadened and narrowed. More and more public employees have been obliged to join the party for career purposes, broadening the membership. But at the same time, putsches have narrowed the ‘membership’ of the behind-the-scene’s power holders. Analysts and popular opinion, both inside and outside Syria, have for decades claimed that the Ba’th party, the army, and the secret services are under the control of the Alawis.

In the eyes of many Sunni Muslims, the regime itself has come to be regarded as anti-religious, despite the fact that the Syrian constitution requires the president to be Muslim. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, Syria was racked by great political strife – euphemistically called ‘the Events’ (*al hawaadeth*) – and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood (and
some radicals on the left) attacked military personnel and political figure heads. The army retaliated with great force, and many Muslim Brotherhood supporters (and innocent bystanders) were killed or imprisoned. Yet, after the brutal eradication of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic aura of the regime increased. Female employees, students and pupils who earlier had been greatly discouraged from, or even forbidden to, covering their hair in public offices, universities and schools, were now allowed to do so. The state supported the building of new mosques and encouraged Muslims to follow a non-political religious path. Many Syrians of all faiths were highly critical of this change of policy, which was commonly considered as insincere and shaped by political expediency. Today, there is still a strong prejudice among urban Sunni Muslims against Alawis. At the same time Sunni Muslims have enjoyed the increased public religious opportunities.

Before ‘the Events,’ religious affiliation was downplayed in the public sector, and there was a strong ideological drive to forge all Syrians into a mould of similarity. The public sector was expanding, and more young people had the opportunity to study at university. The share of women in public workplaces increased dramatically. But after ‘the Events,’ public life and public space in many larger cities have taken on more Islamic veneer. The increased female veiling and emphasis on gender differences has heightened the fears of many Christians, who have come to regard the ‘minority’ character of the regime as a safeguard against increased Islamic public dominance. On Christian feasts, the President will visit, or be visited by, major Christian patriarchs and bishops, and church ceremonies are broadcast to the public on radio and television, underlining the equal value of all Syrian citizens, regardless of faith. The sectarian composition of the regime, and its possible ‘ethnic interests,’ is thus a highly complex issue (Rabo 2011 b).

But it is obvious that the ruling party, and the regime, have not been successful in their goal of eradicating religious and ethnic differences in Syria. On the contrary. People in Syria, especially in the cities, are exceedingly aware of such differences. They also produce and reproduce such differences through talk in their daily lives. Official policies in which
religious differences are ignored or negated have contributed to turning religious sensitivities into vehicles for the presentation of selves and others. In such presentations, gender plays a central role, since religious identities are not a matter of choice but legally shaped (Rabo 2011c). Although Christians and Muslims in Syria are constitutionally equal, the way the state organises ‘family law’ (personal status law) privileges Muslims over Christians. It is legally possible for a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman but not the other way around, unless the man first converts to Islam (Rabo 2005). Muslim men thus have legal privileges that Christians do not. Although a Christian woman who marries a Muslim man does not have to change her religion, the laws followed in such a marriage are those for Syrian Muslims, and the children automatically inherit the religious affiliation of their father. The law thus privileges men over women. Religious affiliation, like citizenship, can never be inherited from one’s mother. For many Christians, this lack of legal equity is at the core of concerns over possible future changes in ‘majority– minority’ relations.

Note
This text is based on material collected through interviews and participant observation in Syria in various periods since the late 1970s, and especially between 2003 and 2009, in connection with a project on family and family law among transnational Syrians, funded by the Swedish Research Council and a project on family law debates in Syria funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.

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Women inspired by religious compassion: An experience from the Egyptian revolution

Shahinaz El Hennawi

Egyptian women’s participation in a revolution is not a new phenomenon: they participated already in the 1805 and 1919 Egyptian revolutions. The 1919 revolution was one of the greatest examples of peaceful revolutions. Women, men, Christian and Muslim, came together from all over Egypt to show solidarity and unity against British occupation.

On January 25, 2011, again women came from all walks of life, and regardless of their political or religious orientation, to participate in the Egyptian revolution. They went through the same hardships, and faced the same consequences. Ever since the beginning, women had a voice and share in social networks (such as Facebook and twitter). They were present in political meetings and security committees, and they were volunteering in field hospitals. And though there were women martyrs during the early months of the revolution, this did not keep other women from being present in great numbers again a year later, on January 25, 2012, condemning the military rule and calling for the martyrs’ retribution.

Egyptian women participating in the revolution had varying backgrounds: they came from different religious beliefs, generations and social classes of society. Young girls, 10-11 years old, as well as women of some 70-80 years, each participated in their own way. Women were out in the streets demonstrating; they were volunteering in field hospitals; they brought food, clothes and medicine to demonstrators; they documented, photographed or worked online as writers, journalists, tweeters and bloggers. They were candidates for parliament or presidency, civil servants, actresses, singers, writers, faculty members, students and house workers.
There was really no difference between women or men for a few months time after the revolution; there were only Egyptians.

**Religion, politics and women**

Despite this unity, after the referendum on the constitution was held, division started. Political parties began forming alliances that put people up against each other. Media played a large role in this division, and there were even special channels and talk shows for different political and religious ideologies. In all this, women tried to gain a unique agency and identity by forming a special feminist party, the Egyptian Women Union, and by joining several NGOs’ and activists’ initiatives, but these efforts remained invisible.

With Islamic groups, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi party, winning together more than 70 percent of the seats in Parliament, many fear that women will be pushed back, in agreement with extremist and patriarchal interpretations of Islam. Yet, and on the other hand, the women wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, aka the Muslim Sisterhood, has become very active after the revolution. They hold women’s conferences, and their Members of Parliament are active compared to the “Nour” Salafi party. However, as a result of the new political situation in Egypt, women’s place in political parties is still minimal. Even though most of the voters were women, the women candidates represent 1.5 percent in the current Egyptian Parliament.

**Legal concerns**

Years back, some legislation related to family law was amended to ensure women’s rights in divorces and regarding custody, among other issues. During the revolution, these laws were in the risk of being annulled, since they had been advocated by the ex-first lady.

Dr Nihad Abou el Koumsan, chair of the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights, is one of the women who have been very actively involved in calling for women’s rights for many years. According to the *El Masry Al Youm* newspaper, she has received death threats for her support of women’s rights, and has been accused – in the name of misused and
misinterpreted Islam – because she has defended the ‘Khole’ law¹ (Aly, Wael, *Al Masry Al Youm* newspaper, 2011).

**Women and Islam in Egypt**

Faith and religion are very important in the Egyptian social and cultural life. In spite of women’s efforts to take part in this field, there is still a long way to go due to the many centuries of male domination. Islamic feminism has emerged in Egypt over the past decade, as several women – such as Omama AbouBakr – have taken part in religious interpretation from a feminist perspective. Aliaa and Aisha Rafea, both daughters of the Sufi Master Ali Rafea, continue their father’s teachings on the spirituality of Islam as something that harmonises believers with the divine order, and brings all believers into contact with one another and the world around them.

Interfaith conflict in Egypt (between the Muslim majority and Christian minority) has a long history. Some of the reasons are historical, social, and cultural; others are related to government policies, such as reluctance to grant Christians permission to build churches, or other legal matters. This is also an issue that still causes trouble for women; in many cases they are accused of being the main reason behind a clash. One interfaith clash that took place during the revolution emerged because of a girl who became the heroine in a religious clash between Muslims and Christians. She first disappeared, and when she appeared again, held hostage in a church, she declared her conversion to Islam. Muslim men gathered around the church to protect and save her – an act that led to clashes and eventually to the burning down of more than one church (Abdel Rady 2011). Women activists and NGOs reacted to this event by issuing a declaration, condemning the use of women as a reason for atrocities in which both Christians and Muslims took part.

**An initiative: Muslim-Christian women wisdom circles**

Two years ago, a group of young women came together with the mutual aim of exploring themselves from a psycho-spiritual approach. We wanted to discover our ‘lost paradise,’ in terms of dreams and goals of our lives that were not pursued, due to self-unawareness, lack of self-esteem and
self-confidence, cultural barriers and misinterpretation of religion. We thought that searching for the purpose of our lives, and understanding our relationship with ourselves, our creator and the universe was the way to reclaim our existence. In doing so, the spiritual aspect was very important. So we tried to understand the ‘real religion,’ hidden beyond rigid rules and regulations, usually the outcome of a patriarchal interpretation of it.

Meetings are still held regularly to discuss issues such as emotional wellness, positive thinking, and important values, in order to reclaim our identity, and to make a stand as Muslim women, in our society as well as globally. Studying Muslim women’s lives from early on has led us to understand Islam from a feminist point of view, and to search women’s rights as well as responsibilities within Islam.

When the revolution began in Egypt, the group was turned into a Women Interfaith Wisdom Circle. We decided to start our program by studying non-violent communication as Dr Marshal Rosenberg approached it. Though the majority of this group is Muslim, we meet weekly in a church in Alexandria. Our aim is to study the approach and use it practically among ourselves, then try to disseminate it into our society. Muslim women will partner with Christians and go out to inform different community sectors about how to use non-violent communication. Our topics include how to give in a compassionate way; how to listen with empathy; and how to take responsibility of our actions by identifying needs and feelings.

Recently, we have searched global bonding by starting our new project of International Women Retreats in Egypt. These retreats aim to bring women from all over the world to holy places in Egypt to share their dreams; search for their purpose; explore their spiritual path; connect with a purpose and level higher than the religious domains constructed by patriarchy; and engage in projects to save our humanity. Our plan is also to train groups of women on how to start similar initiatives in their own societies.
Gendering the Arab spring

Notes
1. Law giving women the right to divorce their husbands according to Islamic Shari’a.
2. Dr Marshal Rosenberg, a Jewish peacemaker who devoted his life trying to bring peace among conflicting parties around the world.

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Islamisation of democracy or democratisation of political Islam?
The future of Morocco after the Arab spring

Fatima Roumate

In certain Arab countries, the result of the revolution and the demonstrations during the Arab spring is that Islamist parties have won the elections. In Morocco, the party of justice and development (JDP) won the elections on November 25, 2011, even though the JDP did not participate in the demonstrations of the February 20 Movement. The same happened in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. A year before the Arab spring, Islamists were not interested in the call for revolution of the revolutionaries; nevertheless, they won the elections.

The demonstrations in Morocco were characterised by slogans demanding social justice, democracy, equality, liberty, and they led to an amendment of the Moroccan constitution as well as new elections, which in turn resulted in an Islamist government. Could we say that the needs made obvious in the Moroccan demonstrations are similar to the objectives of the JDP? Or, are democracy and political Islam (in-) compatible? Or, when the future of the country is now in the hands of an Islamist government, will it be characterised by a democratisation of political Islam or an Islamisation of democracy? In order to answer these questions, we must deal with two essential issues:

- the conditions that led the Islamists to power in Morocco, and the role of religious associations in this success; and
- the processes of democratisation: what are its prospects with an Islamist government?
Gendering the Arab spring

Conditions that led the Islamists to power in Morocco, and the role of religious associations in this success

According to the census of 2004, Morocco has a population of 34.8 million people. Of them, 98.7 percent is Muslim (1.1 percent is Christian, and 0.2 percent is Jewish). The number of illiterates was 43 percent, and the percentage of unemployment was 8.2 during the second trimester of 2010, according to the High Commission of Planning (HCP). With more than 4 million people suffering from poverty after the failure of the socialist-led government, the Moroccan people, especially the young, have lost confidence in the successive governments and in political parties. The Islamist party, however, as well as religious associations have made greater efforts than others to combat poverty. Consequently, their actions on the ground have focused on the struggle against illiteracy; the struggle against unemployment by support to self-employment, granting micro-credits to the young; the granting of financial help to the underprivileged, contributing to schooling for children from underprivileged neighbourhoods, and granting medical help to poor people who suffer from chronic illness. Seen in this perspective, it is obvious why the use of religious faith and spiritual objectives may convince and mobilise people more easily than efforts to convince and mobilise them through projects of social development that focus on gender, participation and human rights. This leads to a certain competition between liberal associations and the Islamist ones. Illiteracy and poverty have thus played a very important role in favour of Islamist associations, ie associations that formed Islamist parties, or were formed by Islamist parties, as well as those Islamist associations that were not allowed by the former government to change into Islamist parties.

Islamist party power must therefore be seen as the fruit of long work and much effort since many years. The demonstration of February 20 contributed to the easily won last elections in Morocco, as did actions and efforts by Islamist and liberal associations – especially feminist – that struggled for years to achieve democracy. The election law also prepared the way for the Islamist party, which benefitted from the majority rule that made it victorious in the last elections. Seen in this light, we may understand the efforts of Islamist associations during the drafting of
the new Moroccan constitution. If social and cultural actors, generally speaking, wanted a culture with human rights, equality and parity, the religious associations were forced to try to reinforce the place of religion in the constitution.

The process of democratisation: What are its prospects with an Islamist government?

A first reading of the different discourses by the new government proves the point of view of the scholar Olivier Roy who has written extensively on political Islam. The government is conservative, but it may nevertheless be democratic; according to Roy, liberals are not necessarily democratic, nor are the democratic necessarily liberals. The confusion between ‘liberal’ and ‘democracy’ has generated a debate on the compatibility of political Islam and democracy. Olivier Roy compares the Islamists who won the elections a year after the Arab Spring to the American Christian democrats. So, if the programme of the new Moroccan government shows that democracy is in the centre of its interests, we must ask what their concept of democracy is like.

The principle of continuity adopted by former governments in Morocco has led the way to democracy; we must remember that democracy is not the choice of the Islamist parties that won the power in Morocco and other Arab countries. It is rather a political obligation imposed by interior challenges, namely to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, as well as foreign challenges imposed by the globalisation process and the present economic and financial crises.

The respect for the principle of continuity, which guarantees security for the judicial achievements concerning the situation of Moroccan women, now is in the centre of a debate concerning the Islamists coming to power. This group has always been for the return of women to the household, as a fundamental element of development and consolidation of the family. When the president of the government presented the governmental programme in the Parliament on January 29, 2012, he pointed out that the Islamists were going to continue on the road towards democracy, and this was confirmed in the discourse of the Minister of General Affairs and Governance at the Davos meeting. But, even if we
may become convinced that political Islam will become democratised, it is still with fear that we wonder how this will be achieved. The history of the party presently presiding the Moroccan government must be taken into consideration; it has always been against any changes to empower women or to integrate them in the socio-economic development of the country.

Democracy is inconceivable without equality, parity, liberty. It is inconceivable without human rights and women’s rights. Democracy is a package; we take it all – or we leave it all. Islamist parties in the Arab world should not be able to choose what they want from this package, and leave what is incompatible with their political goals. In this sense, the issue of women’s position will be the true indicator of an ongoing democratisation of political Islam – or proof of an Islamisation of democracy.

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Religious agency and concerns for spiritual and material change: Liberation theology as a response

Introduction
Olle Kristenson

Unfolding the developmental potential of Islam: How religion acts as moral filter for collective human agency
Solava Ibrahim

Capacity infrastructure in Brazil: Legacies of participation in Christian base communities
Raúl Acosta

Religious organisations within civil society
Wieke Malda-Douma
Religious actors have often been considered obstacles to change and defendants of status quo. Liberation theology may be seen as an alternative and an example of how faith and theological reflection can be instruments for social change. The reflection of liberation theologians has resulted in political action in many societies, Brazil being one example. Liberation theology was of course not the only factor that brought the workers’ party (Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT) and its leader Lula to the presidency, but certainly one important factor.

Liberation theology on development

Liberation theology was born in the 1960s as a reaction against a one-sided view on development, often called developmentalism, desarrollismo in Spanish. When the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez first spoke of liberation theology in July 1968, he was invited to speak on “A theology of development,” but as he entered the lecture hall he went up to the blackboard, wiped out the word ‘development’ (desarrollo), and replaced it with ‘liberation’ (liberación). In an article in a North American journal in 1970 when he had elaborated his lecture further, he says:

[…] we are particularly sensitive to the critical function of theology regarding the Church’s presence and activity in the world. The principal fact about that presence today […] is the participation by Christians in the struggle to construct a just and fraternal society in which men can live in dignity and be masters of their own destinies. We think that the word ‘development’ does not well express those profound aspirations. ‘Liberation’ seems more exact and richer in overtones; besides, it opens up a more fertile field for theological reflection. […] Liberation, therefore, seems to express better both the hopes of oppressed peoples and the fullness of a view in which man is seen not as a passive element, but as agent of history (Gutiérrez 1970, p 243).
Ever since then, this critical view on development has characterised most liberation theologians. The stress on liberation, I would say, is a substantial contribution to any strategy or theory on development, not only 30–40 years ago, but relevant for today’s discussion as well. A conclusion to be drawn from this critical position is that when we speak of development, we must never lose this liberation perspective.

Is liberation theology still relevant, then, 40 years after the publication of the first edition of Gutiérrez epoch-making book *A Theology of Liberation*? Even though it may not appear as often on the agenda of the general theological discussion as it did 30 years ago, the first generation of liberation theologians are still writing, and younger liberation theologians are presenting themselves, to an extent that it is possible to even talk about a second and third generation of liberation theologians.

**Theological reflection and political analysis**

To what extent is liberation theology and similar theologies from other religious traditions of any influence, as we analyse religious agents’ contribution to social and political change?

It is important to point out that liberation theology is not a political programme; it is a theological reflection:

> It is a theological reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human. […] My purpose is not to elaborate an ideology to justify postures already taken […] (Gutiérrez 2001, p 1).

Paradoxically, there is an implicit critique of the Roman Catholic social doctrine that claims to represent “the third way,” between socialism and capitalism, a position that has characterised the Christian democratic parties not least in Latin America. Liberation theology, however – a theological reflection considered to be ‘political’ – criticises this third way for being *too* political.

Characteristic for liberation theology is the *see – judge – act* model, where the first step corresponds to an analysis of the actual context, the second to an assessment of this context from a theological point of view, and the third to some kind of action based on this judgment.
In my own research on the theology of Gutiérrez (Kristenson 2009), I sketch him as a pastoral theologian who tries to respond pastorally to the political context. I identified four discourses in his texts, on which I built my analysis, discourses that show how Gutiérrez’ theological reflection is constructed, and reflect how he relates a socio-political analysis to his theological reflection. The discourses interact, and through this interaction Gutiérrez formulates his pastoral message. For his socio-political analysis, he uses two political discourses, which I call the *radical* and the *liberal* political discourses respectively. The *radical* discourse deals with justice for the poor and liberation from oppression as a prerequisite for peace and harmony in society, which make up the focus of the *liberal* discourse. With the *Catholic theological discourse* Gutiérrez sets the socio-political analysis in relation to Catholic doctrine, and through the *pastoral theological discourse* he responds pastorally, as an advocate for a theology of life, in contrast to the violence and premature death that characterise the reality of especially the poor. If the pastoral theological discourse is what really concerns Gutiérrez, the other three are nevertheless needed to sustain it. Relating the four discourses to the *see – judge – act* model shows how they relate to each other: the two political discourses are necessary for the socio-political analysis, *to see*; the Catholic theological discourse gives criteria for assessment, *to judge*; and the pastoral theological discourse intends to respond to the specific situation, *to act*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Content</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>See</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Radical political discourse</td>
<td>True peace can only be achieved if violence and unjust structures are attacked at their roots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal political discourse</td>
<td>A nation must be constructed on democratic principles and respect for human rights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Judge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic theological discourse</td>
<td>The God of life provides life for all. Solidarity with the poor is ”prompted by faith”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Act</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastoral theological discourse</td>
<td>To give reason for hope and promote action.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
In this table, we may change ‘Catholic theological discourse’ to ‘Doctrinal theological discourse’ to open up the perspective and make the model applicable to other religious traditions as well. I believe that this model can be used as an instrument for seeing how theological reflection and political analysis interact – an interaction that is essential to any theological reflection that intends to be credible in our society. Religion and theological reflection can never be separated, or distanced, from the socio-political context. They may encourage people to act for social change, but they do not prescribe a specific political ideological means. And that brings us to two central questions, developed in the ensuing articles:

- What actually, are the political implications of religion and theological reflection?
- How far can theological reflection go before it is converted into politics?

The example from Brazil addresses how liberation theology became an inspiring force that formed members of Christian base communities to become leaders, thus having a multiplying effect. The case from Egypt describes how religion can be both a political force for public mobilisation and an ‘extreme force’ leading to fundamentalism. And the case from the Netherlands analyses how the dualism between the religious and political mission can be overcome, contrasting the position that churches should abstain from political activity and a biblical interpretation of the political implications of the Christ’s life, death and resurrection.

References


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Unfolding the developmental potential of Islam

Solava Ibrahim

The Rise of Islamists to power in Egypt’s first post-revolutionary parliament surprised the secularist revolutionary forces which made this revolution possible in the first place. Such revolutionary forces not only undermined the role of religion in Egyptian society, but also failed to realise the deep impact of political Islam, especially on highly deprived poor communities. Based on grounded research conducted in two poor communities in Egypt (slum area in Cairo and Menia in Upper Egypt), we may conclude that religion was valued by poor communities much more than income, family and even jobs.

So far, the literature has commonly focused on two roles of religion: 1) its use by political forces for public mobilisation and perpetuation of unjust political and social structures; and 2) its danger as an ‘extreme force’ that can lead to fundamentalism, violence and social conflict. These two views, however, are highly biased and fail to provide a constructive view of how religion can be a catalyst for sustainable social change.

The aim of this article is, therefore, to unravel the developmental potential of religion and to demonstrate its role in facilitating collective human agency in poor Egyptian communities, and in enhancing grassroots-led social change. Rather than conventionally adopting a single faith-based organisation as a unit of analysis, I use an entire Egyptian village – Tafahna Al Ashraf village in Delta region – as an example. Through this case study, the article demonstrates how religion (in this case Islam) has been used as a moral filter to promote community development. The case study also shows how religion can be used not for political gains or social manipulation, but rather as a catalyst to encourage communal participation in
local development, thus leading to a more sustainable bottom-up and culturally embedded model of human development.

To explain this model, the article explores the Islamic principles of wellbeing, social justice and responsibility, whereby religion can act as moral filter to reconcile individual and social interests. It then presents the case study of Tafahna village, in which a local leader used Islamic discourse to promote grassroots development. It explains how such religious discourse succeeded not only in enhancing the collective agency of local villagers, but also led to the establishment of various income-generating, educational and social care projects. The article concludes by pointing out the lessons learnt on how such a grassroots-led religiously inspired model of development can be scaled up to unfold the developmental potential of religion in post-revolutionary Egypt.

**Catalytic religion**

Can Islam – as a religion – act as a catalyst that promotes collective human agency? I argue that Islam can indeed play a crucial role as a moral filter in reconciling individual and communal interests, thus facilitating collective agency and fostering sustainable human development at the grassroots level. To identify such ‘developmental potential,’ there is a need however to distinguish between Islam as a religion and the practice of Islam. This is particularly important due to the increased misuse of religious slogans in politics and public mobilisation during elections. Islam, in particular, has been misused in patriarchal societies to justify and perpetuate existing cultural and social unjust structures that in reality do not have religious foundations, as some claim. This is, for example, the case with the *kholeh* law, which gives women the right to seek divorce and which had been rejected for a long period based on ‘religious’ grounds. Such misuse of Islam to maintain unequal power relations in traditional societies, and the reduction of religion merely to ‘political Islam,’ led to the growing number of fundamentalists and extremists who are increasingly intolerant to ‘others’ and sometimes can even justify the use of violence against those perceived as ‘others.’ The use of such divisive religious discourse leads to fragmented citizenship and poses clear threats to minorities, in Egypt particularly to the Copts.
Religion, however, does not have to be used politically, but instead has a huge developmental potential. The power of religion lies in its valuation by people. In a grounded study that I conducted in an urban slum area in Cairo and rural villages in Upper Egypt, people in poor communities were asked about what they value the most in life – and unsurprisingly, religion topped the list. Instead of being used and misused by politicians, Islam can be used as a moral filter that reconciles individual and communal interests. It has been repeatedly proven, that in contrast to the notion of the ‘invisible hand,’ individuals’ pursuit and maximisation of self-interests and the dynamics of market forces do not automatically lead to social benefits. This is where the role of religion as a moral filter comes in. It allows individuals to still pursue their self-interests, while enhancing their feelings of social responsibility and obligation to account for social goals and communal welfare. Such a moral filter tames the individuals’ self-interests by encouraging people to think about the Hereafter, by obliging them to pay Zakah for the needy, and by allowing them to undertake their economic activities without exploiting the needy or jeopardising social justice. Such ‘taming’ and ‘reconciling’ effect of religion as a moral filter is not a myth; it had been realised, for example, in the case of Tafahna Al Ashraf village in the Delta region in Egypt.

**Developmental Islam in Tafahna village**

In the early 1980s, the village with its 4,000 inhabitants suffered from lack of social services, illiteracy and unemployment. It only had one single primary school and no religious institutes, and was even ‘exporting’ the poorest casual labourers in the region. At present, the village is cited as a success story of local community development with various educational, productive and welfare projects. Led by a dedicated local leader, the local community sought to improve its livelihood sustainably by building educational skills, creating new job opportunities (especially for the youth in the village), and by caring for vulnerable and deprived social groups, such as orphans, widows, the elderly and female-headed households. The local leader used religious – Islamic – discourse to encourage other members of the local community to participate in the initiation and management of these various developmental projects. The villagers united...
and believed in one idea, ie to translate their valued religious principles into actual developmental initiatives. They were not only morally pursuing ‘the good’ for themselves and their community, but they were also economically ‘getting their money back’ through new jobs and businesses, free education for their children, and improved social services. As a result, a number of religious institutes and faculties were established in the village. Social services were improved through the establishment of new roads and health care centres. Factories were also built to meet the increased demand for goods. Part of the profit from these factories was constantly pledged and reinvested in new local development projects to maintain the sustainability of these initiatives. New income-generating and employment opportunities were created, and a ‘multiplier effect’ set off as a result of the students’ influx into the village, and the growing local demand for goods and services.

By using religion as a moral filter, the villagers succeeded not only in reconciling their individual and communal goals, but also decreased their dependence on the state and enhanced their local communal ownership of their local development projects. Above all, religion was the catalyst for enhancing collective human agency in the village. Unfolding the developmental potential of religion led to the creation of various new collective capabilities that each individual alone would not have achieved, such as better education, income, jobs and business opportunities, as well as secured social assistance for the needy. This case study thus clearly demonstrates that Islam – not political Islam – but rather developmental Islam can be a major power to enhance sustainable human development at the grassroots-level.

The example of Tafahna village is not a one-off case, but instead is a religiously induced model to be followed and scaled up. The sustainability of this developmental model lies not only in its cultural embeddedness, but also in its dependence on the local mobilisation of financial and human resources, its emphasis on the developmental role of local leaders, and its enhancement of communal ownership. Religion, however, is an essential but insufficient element for sustaining such acts of collective agency. These acts still need to be institutionalised and well-governed
Liberation theology

to benefit the local community and to ensure the inclusion of deprived social groups. Islam – as a religion – is thus not only a powerful lubricant for collective agency, but also has a huge developmental potential that is still to be realised!

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Soon after it was launched within Catholic ranks, as an historic necessity in the light of prevalent inequalities around the world, liberation theology reached faraway corners of the planet in the form of Christian Base Communities (CEBs, after their Portuguese name). These prayer groups were set up in churches to follow guidelines that centred on three basic principles: individual faith, awareness of injustice and oppressive situations, and action to revert such oppression. The discussions that ensued within each of these groups helped thousands of people grow aware of their historical circumstances, and become active agents to change them.

In Latin America, however, these groups have not altered a regional configuration that is still one of the most unequal in the world. The CEB development in each nation-state differed due to a variety of reasons, among them the support from bishops and the Catholic hierarchy. Brazil has been recognised as one of the countries where CEBs flourished. It is suggested here that among their legacies in the South American giant, a ‘capacity infrastructure’ has been of instrumental importance to numerous leaders, who moved on to work in civil society organisations. The implication of this legacy is an enhancement of Brazil’s democratisation, through the professionalisation of civil society organisations that has taken place since the 1980s (Smith 1994; Cavendish 1994).

The term ‘capacity infrastructure’ is used here to designate the relational character (‘infrastructure’) of acquired skills (‘capacities’), which makes them easy to apply in political engagements. CEBs are religious organisations, but their design includes an enhancement of conscientisation (Freire 1993). “What begins as a spiritual insight can easily have conse-
quences intentional and unintentional in the world of public discourse and collective decision-making” (Smith 1994, p 122). By instilling a call to principled action in participants, CEBs tend to stimulate the ethical imagination (Moore 2011, p 15). The ‘capacity infrastructure’ may not have been intended, but in hindsight appears to have been crucial for the burgeoning of civil society organisations. There is widespread agreement about the positive influence of CEBs to Brazil’s democratisation.

**Liberation theology and social change**

As a theological project, liberation theology sought “an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor’s suffering” (Berryman 1987, p 4), as many previous movements within the Catholic Church have done throughout history. With the establishment of CEBs, the proponents of liberation theology strove for a practical arrangement to engage believers.

Each CEB consists of between 20 and 70 members, and meets at a local parish church or community centre. The group dedicates its time to prayer, reading of the Bible, discussing the reality around them, and debating in which ways they can make a difference to their community. The boom of CEBs in Brazil took place in the 70s. Perhaps the dictatorship that lasted from 1964 to 1985 helped make its message more relevant than it would otherwise have been. Civic life was stifled, as all independent associations were banned. CEBs, which would be officially described as prayer groups, offered an opportunity for people to come together. The number of CEBs in the country grew from 40,000 in 1974 to 80,000 in the early 1980s, and it reached 100,000 by 1984 (Burdick 1993, p 2; Dawson 2007, pp 150, 152). The number is still today in the tens of thousands, despite the Vatican’s discouragement and criticisms since the 1980s.

The aim of CEBs can be seen as an effort to encourage individuals to think critically about the circumstances that make their lives difficult, and to promote their engagement with their community. It is similar to the development industry’s concept of ‘empowerment’. Its support in theological debates meant a high degree of legitimisation.

The analysis that follows builds on reflections about affectivity in socio-cultural changes through the use of the ethical imagination (Moore
Liberation theology relied on a combination of renewal in Catholic spirituality and engagement with a widespread aspiration for social change. This linked their epistemology of praxis to a sense of agency and empowerment (Bennett 2007; Boff 1987; Graham 2002). Its pedagogical character is geared to a progressive agenda in the promotion of: critical thought (through the analysis of social circumstances); reflexivity (through a process of locating their own lives within a wider set of circumstances); and agency (through the encouragement to do something to stop injustice or exploitation). The fact that this takes place within a community prayer group offers the opportunity to learn through affective relations. The combination of faith and personal relations with a critical outlook on shared situations of injustice or exploitation may lead to a stronger sense of urgency to act.

The CEB model of ‘capacity infrastructure’

The ‘capacity infrastructure’ referred to in this paper allows to gear the set of skills learned through participation in CEBs into a wider field of ideas and action. The activists I met who had taken part in CEBs had a peculiar outlook on processes to follow in order to tackle problems. Thus, the ‘capacity infrastructure’ comprises: 1) a networking horizon, 2) a processual approach, and 3) a pedagogical cycle. These characteristics make it different to ‘social capital’, which refers more to the value of existing networks (Portes 1998, p 2).

The networking horizon refers to an awareness of the advantages of interconnected action. Such appreciation may lead individuals to think of potential webs that were previously non-existent. Although in our ‘information society’, networks have become the “new organisational logic” (Castells 2010, p 164), the capacity referred to here was innovative, when it happened in the ’70s. Since 1975, there have been meetings among representatives from local CEBs from all over Brazil (Dawson 2007, p 150). These gatherings have formed networks that aid the flow of information about achievements and struggles. As a trend of clustering progressive organisations, it preceded the massive wave of networking among NGOs and social movements that started in the ‘80s throughout the world (Boli and Thomas 1999). Furthermore, the features of these webs ensured a
long-lasting commitment and engagement with social issues. First of all, they had as a legitimating principle a shared sense of the transcendental. Secondly, the extended faith community encouraged ideological bonds and the idea of action as a response to perceived injustice and exploitation.

The *processual approach* refers to an awareness of time scales needed to exert changes in difficult situations. The collective reading of the Bible, and dialogues on the history of Christianity and of Brazil provide for reflection over long cycles in social conditions and changes. The political scope of liberation theology enhances the idea of individual agency or ‘empowerment’ through both prayer and debate. Several authors have emphasised how CEB participants acquire organisational, communication and leadership skills (Smith 1994, p 123). Such skills are best used with a sense of timing and an awareness of time scales.

The *pedagogical cycle* refers to an embedded character of CEBs to help the oppressed acquire skills and knowledge that would help them escape injustice or exploitation (Gutiérrez 1973). The regular meetings, debates and dialogues were to become a habit that helped individuals to appropriate reflections and capacities in order for them to incorporate them into their practice. This in turn would mark how to frame new strategies. All three aspects of the ‘capacity infrastructure’ are interrelated and allow for a long-term transformation of attitudes and thus of situations.

**Empowering social change**

This CEB legacy appears to have permeated Brazilian civil society organisations, aiding in their strengthening over the last few decades. The assertion is based on a number of observations, interviews, and an analysis of the literature, but was not at the centre of our project and needs to be explored in further research. If it did occur, however, it took place at a crucial time for Brazil. Resistance to the dictatorship gained strength through CEBs, which also spurred many different associations and other groups, including the Workers’ Party.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the Catholic church’s role in providing space for interaction and organization, a communications
network, and human rights advocacy during the most difficult years of the authoritarian period (Keck 1992, p 47).

Once the dictatorship fell and the transition to democratic governance started, the dense web of civil society organisations advocated for a thorough process in drafting the new constitution (Abers 2000). The resulting constitution, approved in 1988, has been called the ‘citizen constitution’ because of its strong support for citizen and civil society organisations involvement in government or public issues (Holston 2008, p 107).

The political moment in which CEBs started was marked by progressive ideas within the Catholic Church. “Clearly, during the ‘60s, the movement within the Roman Catholic Church was evident in addressing human-rights violations and economic injustice” (Kirylo 2001, p 61). There was increasing public debate about the oppression of the poorest populations in Latin America and other continents. Liberation theology’s precedents are to be found among those who from within the Catholic Church defended indigenous populations from exploitation and slavery (Dussel 1981). In 1968, Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian priest, gave a presentation called ‘A Theology of Liberation’, and spearheaded the movement that was to influence the Bishop’s Conference held in Medellin later that same year. From then on, thousands of CEBs were created.

‘Capacity infrastructure’ – a CEB legacy to social movements

I witnessed activists and advocates in their quotidian campaigns and efforts to improve social situations and the protection of the forest in the Brazilian Amazon. One of the scenes where what I would later call the ‘capacity infrastructure’ became evident to me, was at a meeting in Alter do Chão, in the state of Pará. In that meeting, two NGOs convened representatives of small farmers, social movements, local residents, environmentalists, and others. Their aim was to form a network of leaders of communities located along the BR-163, a road scheduled to be paved by the federal government of Brazil. Some of those taking part in the meeting had been part of a CEB in their area, and showed a similar outlook on the diagnosis of the problems they confronted. The three elements were present in a significant way: 1) the networking horizon marked
the main objective of the initiative: to form a web that would have the legitimacy and capacity to address concerns of all stakeholders involved; 2) the processual approach marked the clarity over time-scales required, as one NGO participant mentioned during one of the workshops about a controversial issue: “That will take at least a year of talks with locals; we will need to visit them regularly;” 3) the pedagogical cycle included many talks by scientists and workshops in which all stakeholders would put forward their assessments and discuss potential outcomes of different scenarios.

Although these issues can be said to form part of the now standard action repertoire of NGOs in the area, several clues pointed to a more complicated cross-fertilisation of ideas with CEBs. For example, the role of religion in the socio-environmental movement was very present in that particular meeting – as in others I attended – as well as in other spheres. In Alter do Chão, a priest, who was the leader of a social movement to denounce illegal deforestation in a remote area in the state of Pará, participated. He had recently taken over; his predecessor had been assassinated, and all other members refused to take over the leadership, out of fear. There were other examples as well. The involvement of religious activists in various parts of the Amazon helped to inspire and mobilise support from numerous individuals, institutions and organisations. When the nun Dorothy Stang was assassinated in 2005 for her activities to stop illegal deforestation, the repercussions were wide and intense. In large part, they were due to her being an American citizen, although a naturalised Brazilian as well, but also for her vocation. She was soon labelled a ‘martyr’ (Murphy 2007; Le Breton 2008). While religiosity of any kind is performative, either in its ceremonies or in its directives concerning conduct, liberation theology involves a deliberate performance to try and change political configurations. It is a call to activism (Smith 1991).

As has been noted elsewhere, CEBs promoted a bottom-up approach to collective organisation. They “disseminated ideals of equality and citizenship” (Abers 2000, p 31). Numerous studies have shown how CEBs helped increase participation in community organisations to face
a wide range of situations (Adriance 1986, 1991; Barreiro 1982; Hewitt 1986). In São Paulo, for example, Holston has shown how dwellers in illegal housing developments organised themselves and achieved legal recognition of ownership of their houses (Holston 2008). The influence of CEBs on mobilisation and civil society organisation is noticeable, when individuals go to work as activists or advocates after having participated in CEBs. This paper suggests that among the CEBs’ potential legacies the one of ‘capacity infrastructure’ has reverberated further than just among CEB participants because of its adaptability to different situations. In this sense, it is similar to what Weber claims occurred with the cultural changes brought about by Protestantism; changes in theological principles and their derived religious practices may have unforeseen consequences (Weber 2002, p 48).

The organisation of the World Social Forum (WSF) has inherited several traits and lessons learnt from CEBs. The WSF is an umbrella organisation that brings together thousands of social movements, NGOs, activists, and other civil society groups in order to encourage collective actions and mutual learning. As a progressive assembly of individuals and organisations, it follows the Marxist principle of a bottom-up structure, while remaining open to large NGOs and foundations. During my research at several meetings of the WSF, I have noticed various elements reminiscent of CEBs. For starters, the message of hope is evident in its slogan: ‘Another world is possible.’ Also, its Charter of Principles includes a strong emphasis on the value of diversity and a search for alternative paths to human development (Acosta 2009). These elements are similar to many documents produced by liberation theologians and activists, who learned their trade in CEBs. Whitaker, one of the early WSF conveners and visible leaders, had been close to the Catholic Church and liberation theology. In his texts and presentations, he insistently refers to the WSF as a network based on a process rather than an event, emphasising its pedagogical nature (Whitaker 2005). Leonardo Boff, another of the initiators of the WSF, was one of the key liberation theologians from its inception in the ‘60s (Boff and Boff 1984). He has spoken frequently at the WSF in front of thousands of eager followers. Had this been solely a Marxist or leftist gathering, most of the very visibly religion-based
organisations would presumably not be as prominent in every meeting as they are. The inception of the WSF is, of course, not solely due to CEBs, but CEBs were of crucial importance, and it is probably no coincidence that the WSF started in Brazil.

Conclusion
Among the various legacies of CEBs, the most important for civil society organisations may be what is here called ‘capacity infrastructure’. By using a Marxist framework to analyse reality, while offering a reappraisal of theological principles, CEBs openly promoted a radical change in people’s religiosity and its practice. This led to an awareness of collective organisation with special characteristics pertinent to the current historical moment. What is suggested here is an interpretation of facts observed and literature reviewed, and future investigations with direct focus on this topic may yet prove or refute the assertion.

The concept of ‘network’ has become extremely influential in various academic fields. As it has grown in popularity in organisational architecture, its influence has reached far and wide. Its consideration here, however, is not limited to practical arrangements. The theological foundation of CEBs provides them with a sense of transcendence, which in turn helps participants incorporate teachings and practices at a deeper level than simply the practical. In referring to ‘capacity infrastructure,’ therefore, I allude to an appropriation of actions that are linked to the improvement of the self and the community. As a legacy, its influence may be secularised, but its religious roots help understand the depth of its reach.

Note
1. This article is based on ethnographic research for a project that did not originally concern liberation theology. Fieldwork was carried out among activists and advocates of socio-environmental development in the Brazilian Amazon between 2004 and 2005. It was complemented by research carried out in five meetings of the World Social Forum (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2009).
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Religious organisations within civil society

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This paper examines the way in which religious organisations can fulfill a social and political role within civil society. In recent years, religious associations and communities have come increasingly into view, especially in the role they can play within the field of social care and welfare. In the Dutch situation, this increased role is obvious through the fact that religious organisations are invited to fulfill a social and political role to minimise social problems and to work for improvement of the social environment.

This article is based on literature research and discusses the theological pros and cons for taking on such a social and/or political role. It will discuss the English theologian O’Donovan and the way he offers inspiration to religious organisations as they try to find an appropriate attitude within civil society. The focus will be on Christian churches, though the arguments brought forward are also partly valid for other religious organisations.

Legislative changes in the Netherlands

Since 2007, the Dutch government has made major changes in its social legislation; the establishment of the Social Support Act is an important part of this. The Act implies a huge shift within the whole system of social care and welfare. One of the most interesting changes is the fact that the national and local governments are no longer the primary responsible parties when people are in need. This responsibility is instead shifted towards people’s natural social network, such as family, friends, neighbours or church people. Only if this network is not able to help in solving the problem(s), the government will step in.
The underlying legislative text states that religious organisations, as part of civil society, have an important role to play, for example in offering volunteers, or organising activities that might improve social cohesion in a neighbourhood. Research has shown that Dutch churches highly contribute to society by developing all kinds of social activities. Converted into monetary value, the social attribution of Dutch churches runs into millions. So churches are seen as important sources of social capital, and for a good reason. They are in a number of cases even subsidised for fulfilling these tasks (Davelaar and van Waesberghe 2010; Dekker and de Hart 2011).

For this reason, churches are often invited to take part in advisory councils that advice the local government on topics that are related to social care and welfare legislation. They also have an evaluating task.

**Theological arguments against a social/political role for churches**

Some theologians have argued that by accepting such a social and/or political role, churches focus on secondary tasks, thereby neglecting their proper task, which is to preach and evangelise. In an article about whether or not churches should accept social or political tasks, F S Fiorenza (1982) argues that the whole discussion boils down to the old dualism between the Church’s religious and social or political mission. Those who argue that focus should lie on the religious mission of the church are supported by quotes by two popes: “Christ gave his Church no proper mission in the political economic or social order. The purpose which he set before her, is a religious one,” and “the objective of the Church is to evangelize, not to civilize” (Fiorenza 1982, p 198).

Critics of political and liberation theology have long feared that the Church’s mission has been equated with a social mission. Quoting Campbell and Holloway, Fiorenza (1982, p 198) states: “Liberation theology replaces the gospel of love and forgiveness with social reform, legislative change, and political programs.” Underlying this criticism is a dichotomous model that separates religion and politics as clearly distinct and separate.

Fiorenza’s article was written in 1982, but the tension between proponents for the religious mission of the church vs her social/political
mission has not been resolved. The American Methodist theologian Stanley Hauerwas is a contemporary interpreter of the opinion that churches should abstain from political activity. He is critical of the ‘civil society’ concept, seeing it as normative rather than neutral. He states that any government has goals that it wants to realise through civil society, and that churches that surrender to these goals are no longer free to follow their own agenda. He therefore encourages Christian churches to claim their own space and articulate their specific vision of the common good. In so doing, churches can pursue whatever they find best for people around them and for society as a whole. Theologically, Hauerwas makes a distinction between the current societal and political structures and the new, expected, eschatological structures. These ‘new’ structures will show society as it is meant to be, glorifying the one and only authority, God. According to Hauerwas, churches as representatives of the new structures should have nothing to do with the old structures.

Hauerwas has been influential in the Dutch context, discouraging Dutch Christians to take on a more public role (Wallet 2008). However, people recognise the acquired tasks within social care and welfare as matching their diaconal duty. Thus, they are happy that these tasks are given back to the churches, even though they are afraid to not be able to satisfy all the needs. Hauerwas’ lacking persuasiveness may be linked to the fact that the current governmental goals with civil society are recognised as good, Christian and worthwhile.

Theological arguments for a social/political role for churches

Other theologians see a more positive relationship between religion and social or political action. Fiorenza (1982), for example, mentions Pannenberg and Rahner, who both designed models by which churches could be politically and socially active. Pannenberg states that churches can do so to fill in the deficiencies of other responsible agencies; Rahner proposes that churches take on a social or political role in unofficial ways, ie via laypersons, but remain institutionally uninvolved. According to Fiorenza, these ideas do however not overcome the religious vs social/political dichotomy.
The British theologian Oliver O’Donovan (1996) offers a way out of the grip of this dichotomy. Without doing justice to his profound exegetical and hermeneutical thoughts, some of his central ideas in political theology are inspiring to consider. Following Hauerwas, O’Donovan confirms the difference between the current social/political structures and the new, expected, eschatological ones. O’Donovan says, however, that the church may have a double function: on the one hand to represent the future, and on the other to “uphold the provisional justice Christ brings through these institutions and to recognize the current situation as the gracious space the church has for her own existence and mission within this world” (de Bruijne 2006, p 42).

Liberation theology optimistically believed that it would be possible to bring God’s kingdom closer by working on justice and solutions to social problems (Kennedy 2007, p 112). O’Donovan sharply criticises this optimism by arguing that no human being can ever really solve these deep-rooted problems. Only through the “Christ event,” as he calls it, referring to Christ’s death and resurrection, can God’s kingdom come into reality – and not in this era, but in times to come. Thus, political action by churches and Christians should never aim at creating a new society, only help in bringing justice and solving problems within the old structures, thereby showing God’s grace at work.

According to O’Donovan, the contribution of churches and Christian individuals to a better and more righteous society is not a ‘second-rated’ task. It fully matches the priority task of the Church, which is to spread the gospel and evangelise. Analysing social and political problems, Christians may add their own, eternal perspective. O’Donovan thus provides the basis for evangelical ethics to go together with earthly responsibility and for the possibility of rational communication and consensus with other members of society.

Also within the evangelical tradition, authors have recently argued for the integration of sacred and secular under a widened definition of God’s mission in the world. These authors are increasingly influential, as Michael Williams (2010) has shown, quoting for example C Wright (2006) on this matter. Wright and O’Donovan both point to God’s
redemptive work through Christ as the final mission in this world, which has already changed everything for the better. The churches’ mission in the world is a legitimate and needed sign of this, and that is why O’Donovan calls theological reflection inevitably political (O’Donovan 1999).

**Religion within a liberal social framework**

Bringing religion into the political field inevitably evokes problems, especially within liberal societies. Churches still experience resistance when approaching local policymakers (Davelaar and van Waesberghe 2010). However, the recent rise of religion within society has shown religion as an important societal factor in the design of a good and worthy society (Van de Donk 2006).

Civil society can provide a solution of how to give space to religion. O’Donovan proposes to see civil society as a plural concept, instead of a neutral or normative concept. He states that the political order is part of the ‘old’ provisionary and temporary structure, which needs to offer space to individuals and to smaller, natural networks and communities wherein people live. Ad de Bruijne, a Dutch theologian who has studied O’Donovan profoundly, says (2006, p 264):

> Unlike the smaller communities, in which people share and communicate a positive earthly common good, a political society only comes into being by resisting attacks on such a common good. The eschatological society is the only one that knows an all-encompassing common good in the form of the communication of love to God. […] Therefore the political order should remain pluralistic until the arrival of the eschatological kingdom.

According to de Bruijne, and following O’Donovan, the political order should always be modest, leaving space to a variety of opinions, world-views and communities. Civil society is the space where these communities can flourish, and diverse opinions can be communicated. Another Dutch theologian, Erik Borgman, confirms that religion should be fully part of this process. He calls plurality a “religiously significant situation” and a good alternative to the liberal conviction that referred religion back to the sidelines (Borgman 2009, pp 48-50). Based upon this changed
thinking about religion, it is to be expected that religion will come into view even more, offering new challenges for society as a whole.

Notes
1. Statement of Explanation on the Social Support Act (“Memorie van toelichting Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning”), part 1.1.g.1.
2. Research has shown that church-attending people are the most active in doing voluntary work (van de Donk 2006; Dekker et al 2006; Castillo Guerra et al 2008; van der Sar and Visser 2006; Roorda-Lukkien 2006: Bernts 2004).
3. In contrast to these ‘voices,’ the first encyclica written by Pope Benedictus VXI (2006) shows great diaconal relevance. Pope Benedictus here says “diakonia” is part of the threefold commission of the church (kerygma/martyria, leitourgia and diakonia), and he also calls “caritas” an “unrelinquishable task of the church” (Deus Caritas Est, nr. 25a).
4. Hauerwas states so in an interview in a Dutch Newspaper (Nederlands Dagblad, 01/03/2008). An expanded interview with Hauerwas is published in the Dutch news-magazine Wapenveld (02/2008).
5. De Jong (2003, 2004) shows that the amount of volunteers will dramatically decrease because of the aging of the current volunteers.

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Introduction

Päivi Hasu

For several decades, Western social thought was dominated by various versions and ideas of modernisation. They were accompanied by secularisation theses assuming that as societies develop and modernise, they would undergo a process of secularisation. It was believed that modernising societies would become functionally differentiated, and that increasing rationalisation would bring about decline in the public significance of religion. Today, around the world, it is not difficult to see that this has not been the case. Churches and faith-based organisations are increasingly important in the public life and in the lives of the poor in many different faith contexts. It has been estimated that in Sub-Saharan Africa, 50 percent of education and health services were provided by faith groups and faith-based organisations at the beginning of the millennium.

The unfolding of religious, economic and political events in Africa has increasingly turned the attention of not just development practitioners but also scholars to the relationships between religion and politics on the one hand, and religion and development on the other. Development agents and political analysts have started to seriously consider the role played by religious values and religious organisations in supporting or hindering policies and processes. After 9/11, religion has become a key focus in political science; literature has been produced on the role of religion, especially Islam, in the political sphere; and literature that analyses religious organisations in development is rapidly increasing in numbers. Finally, over the past two decades or so, academics have turned their attention to the rise and transformation of religion and religiosity around the world, particularly in the Global South. New forms of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity have developed, Islam in its various forms is growing, and a rising number of diasporic groups with religious networks are changing the religious milieus of Western societies.
Religion and politics

From the end of the 1980s, with the collapse of the one-party systems and trends towards democratisation, Christian churches played a remarkable role in promoting democratic values whilst acting inside civil society. Consequently, the role of mainline Christian churches in the three waves of democratisation in both Anglophone and Francophone Africa became the focus of interest. With the liberalisation that took place during the 1990s, new forms of Islamic organisations for youth, women and students became active participants in civil society, and in the last 20 years public Islam has had a more pronounced public presence in Africa. This has been reflected also in the number of studies on Christian-Muslim relations. Since the 1990s, academia has witnessed a real boom in Pentecostal studies.

Just to go back in time a little: One influential study of the 1980s worth mentioning is that of Jean Comaroff on Zionism in southern Africa, highlighting the importance of black South Africans’ resistance against apartheid (Comaroff 1985). Comaroff argued that Tshidi Zionism, with its religious imagery and non-verbal behaviour, developed as a form of consciousness and mode of resistance that encompassed colonial political economy and culture. Later criticism has argued that resistance as a category may have been imposed on what was merely ethnographic and historical observations. And as Richard Werbner asked: “What weight must we give to the explicit intent of the people themselves as against our inferences about the implicit and the unspoken?” (Englund 2011, p 7). This idea of resistance does involve a perspective on politics as something else, other than what takes place within the confines of formal political institutions. However, it appears to reduce religion to a “second order process of adjustment to the world out there” or a “mode of interpretation and understanding.” Several recent studies make strong arguments that the religious and the political cannot be treated as two separate spheres but should be examined as elements of the same complex (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004; Marshall 2009, and Englund 2011).

On similar lines, Barbara Bompani suggests in her recent, edited volume *Development and Politics from Below* (Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2011) that politics is not only about the formal activities of elected
representatives or government servants, but it is also integral to informal activities and less analysed organisations. Politics, in other words, is also made from below by ordinary people; the political discourse integral to religious community life at local level does not necessarily engage with institutionalised components of politics, such as party organisations, but seeks instead to promote democratic values, such as citizenship, social justice and civic rights. As an example of this, Follér and Vembane suggest in this volume (pp 164-172) that in Mozambique, Muslim activists have given up their explicitly political ambitions and are now engaging more fully in civil society in the struggle against HIV, in civic education and in their inclusive actions towards citizenship of women.

Another response has been that of Harri Englund (2011) who adopts the notion of public culture in the study of religion in Africa in order to deal with the problematic idea of religion as a second-order process of adjustment. He argues that the notion is less demarcated institutionally than formal politics, and prompts questions about how certain events, ideas, and practices assume public significance and thereby cross over the boundaries of their own domains. He argues that the great promise of studying any religion as an integral aspect of public culture is the way in which embodied experiences can be represented as coexisting with instances of deliberative and critical reason.

Religion and development

Religious discourse developed a new concern with the conduct of public life in the latter years of the 20th century, as religious leaders and organisations became more willing to step onto the public stage, and to highlight the moral and spiritual import of public policy. In the context of international development, revitalisation of public religion is evident in the growth of faith-based activism.

To cut a long story short, since the 1980s, international economic policies started to demand reduced government spending, privatisation and market liberalisation as a condition to development aid. At the same time, major donor countries changed their aid distribution policies. This brought about a dramatic increase of NGOs, including faith-based organisations, that flourished as a result of economic neo-liberalism and
the collapse of public services. The role of faith-based organisations was recognised also at the international monetary institutions in late 1990s, when James Wolfensohn, then President of the World Bank, and George Carey, then Archbishop of Canterbury, initiated the World Faiths Development Dialogue.

Changing trends in development policies and practices were reflected in research as well. Classic theories of development paid little or no attention to religion because it seemed irrelevant, and religion was seen as an obstacle to modernisation. However, in 1980, one of the first attempts towards a new research agenda was the special issue of the journal *World Development* that explored the relationship between religion and development. It went largely unnoticed at the time, when international policy defined development largely in terms of economic growth, and religion was neglected in the academic field of development studies. However, after these initial efforts a body of studies has surfaced, discussing faith-based organisations and development, and relating them to the nature of civil society (eg Clarke et al 2008). Furthermore, general conceptual studies of the relationship between religion and development have emerged more recently (eg Deneulin et al 2009; ter Haar 2011).

Donor policy towards faith-based organisations has traditionally been driven by constitutional conventions on the separation of church and state, conventions which dictated an arms-length relationship with most FBOs. Since the early 1980s, however, fundamental changes in the conduct of international relations have subjected these conventions to significant strain. In particular, the rise of the US Christian right, of political Islam and of identity politics and public religion and the concomitant fall of socialism, communism and secular nationalism have eroded the orthodoxy of secular development discourse. In recent years, these developments have propelled FBOs to prominence in development discourse and policy as well as research.

The ensuing chapters explore the intersection of religion, politics and development. They discuss in their different ways how faith communities may either aim at bringing about social and political transformations, or in some cases just try to understand and control the prevailing social and economic conditions rather than seek to transform them. Whereas Forje
focuses on the more formal state-church relations as a potential arena for bringing about transformations, Follér and Vembane describe how faith activists have given up direct political action for civic education at the grassroots. Deacon, on the other hand, describes a case where the actions of a faith community appear to represent attempts at survival rather than improvement of the lifeworld or addressing of the wider inequalities.

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Satan’s snake and political violence in Kenya

Gregory Deacon

Kibera and Kenya’s 2007 election

Kibera is an informal settlement, covering 550 acres, located seven kilometres southwest of the city centre of Kenya’s capital, Nairobi. Kibera as a settlement is about 100 years old. As early as 1944, though, the Reverend Leonard Beecher described the area as being “really a most awful slum” with bad roads and disgraceful housing (Parsons 1997, p 105). It continues to be described as “a bewildering maze of dirt paths and open sewers that wind through neighbourhoods of run-down shacks with dirt floors and corrugated tin roofs” and as having “no running water, no electricity, no sanitation and no modern conveniences” (United Methodist Reporter 2006). Still today, residents live their day-to-day lives in difficult and often dangerous conditions with poor indicators in terms of life chances.

The controversial re-election of Mwai Kibaki as president of Kenya at the end of December 2007 was followed by two months of extensive violence, “between Kalenjin and Kikuyu communities in Eldoret… perpetrated by the state in Kisumu, and… between Luo residents and Kikuyu members of the Mungiki gang in Kibera” (Cheeseman 2008, p 170). It is estimated that well over 1,000 people were killed, and more than 300,000 people internally displaced. In one incident that received particularly high levels of international media coverage, 30 people were burned alive in a Pentecostal, Kenya Assemblies of God church in the Rift Valley. Various churches were also destroyed in Kibera, with the Lutheran, Baptist and Africa Inland Mission churches receiving media coverage, and small Pentecostal churches being less visibly enveloped in widespread looting and torching of properties. Kibera was subject to three main waves of attacks. On the day following Kibaki’s inauguration, a large number of residents attempted to march to Uhuru Park in central...
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Nairobi to demonstrate. Police and the General Service (paramilitary) Unit (GSU) repulsed them. This was followed by a situation in which Kibera was ringed by the police and GSU for the remaining period of clashes, until an agreement was signed between the main, national, political protagonists. In Kibera, this period was characterised by looting and burning of property and businesses that were or were said to be owned by Kikuyus (Kibaki’s ethnic group).

Understandings of violence

Initial discussions amongst Kiberans I spoke and listened to regarding the election results, the violence, and the role played by politicians and other leaders and protagonists revolved around material political conditions and actions – ie specific vote-rigging mechanisms, and the payment of agitators by powerful individuals, and the perceived behaviour of the different national political parties. Kenyans and Kiberans could not be said to have been ill informed as to the motivations and actions of their erstwhile political representatives. In particular in Kibera, the actions of allegedly funded agitators, or those who chose to take advantage of events for material gain or to settle personal scores, were observed and commented upon by most if not all residents, especially as the majority of people involved were well known to their relatives, friends and neighbours. Certainly, there were high levels of gossip and rumour present at the time, especially as local news was subject to a government-imposed blackout, and rumours also appear to have been utilised for political ends. Nevertheless, discussion took place in terms of specific personal action and control, rather than in any abstract or metaphorical sense. It was not the case that Kiberans did not understand what was going on – indeed it could well be argued that local residents had a far better understanding of events than the international media, for example.

A few weeks after the signing of the peace agreement that put an end to the strife, though, one of the Pentecostal pastors I worked with in Kibera asked to meet with me to consider an idea that I was subsequently to hear from and discuss with a number of other people: namely that the post-election violence in Kenya resulted from the presence and actions of a Tanzanian mganga (witchdoctor) who came to Kenya with his enchanted
snake, boasted of high-level political clients and manipulated “events through that snake.” However, the Satanic discourse did not replace initial understandings; rather, it coexisted with them. The dry language of political machination was insufficient to express the horror and fear that Kiberans felt. Furthermore, the imagery of the *mganga* also provided a powerful explanation for events that felt beyond the control of mere men and women. Indeed, it is my contention that Pentecostals in Kibera utilise their faith in attempts to express, understand and control their uncertain lives. High-level politics takes place in what is perceived to be a distant sphere, controlled by moneyed, powerful elites. The lack of control felt by Kiberans was to some extent mitigated through cathartic expression and narratives of divine planning.

**Expression and catharsis**

Much of the language utilised in the churches I worked with in Kibera was concerned with expressing a sense of oppression and struggle to survive. It was stated that “people suffer” and “people are burdened by Satan.” People felt that they were “beaten as if with a whip by sickness and poverty” or were “straining financially, socially and spiritually.” Events were seen as resulting from “spiritual sickness.” Pentecostal adherents wondered “why [our] money, job and family [are] not prospering.” People’s “home, family or business” were said to be “broken.” A pastor said that “the journey is long” and that “in the ghetto we are carrying burdens” such as “illness and poverty.” These statements very directly expressed the situation in which Kiberans found themselves and how they felt.

Other language gave more metaphorical descriptive colour to descriptions of people’s lives, and how circumstances were felt to be. In particular, images of struggle and resistance were evoked. So, for example, in a Bible study session it was said that “What is happening in Kenya is spiritual warfare” and that people needed “awareness [like] in military training [where] you get to know how to use different guns and bombs.” An evangelist stated that “the battle is God’s” and that members should “advance don’t retreat.” During a crusade, attendees were said to be “soldiers of the Lord.” To some extent these statements and discussions provide a “cathartic release of pent-up emotions or tension” and a limited
“sense of well-being” (Heider 1974, p 32). This very much represents a coping strategy, though. The difficult conditions in which people live are not transformed, and therefore catharsis offers “changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, p 178).

Understanding, purpose and control

As well as expressing how they felt, members of Pentecostal churches that I worked with sought to make sense of their lives amidst the uncertain, ambiguous and threatening environment of Kibera. In particular, it was frequently stated in the churches I attended that God “has a purpose.” This sentiment was also expressed in statements that there is a “plan God has for you [that] cannot be changed.” Within North American churches, such statements refer to a theological and cultural concept according to which one should receive the Holy Spirit and accept that God is in control. Such acceptance is expected to allow the individual infused with the Holy Spirit to be relaxed and confident and, through its power, to fulfil their destiny, which should be to be a wealthy and successful individual. In Kibera, as well as providing a sense of meaning and order to life, this concept seemed to allow people to view their circumstances as part of a plan for them rather than their own ‘fault.’ This more sympathetic understanding was elaborated when one pastor said that “Jesus knows what it is to be poor.”

That life is the result of a divine plan provides reassurance and partially assuages the guilt and depression associated with poverty, or, in particular, inequality; Kibera is situated close to great wealth and success, and such inequality is damaging for positive self-perception. Furthermore, as socio-economic success is associated with blessings, a lack of success can be associated with a lack of faith, which in turn can be attributed to sinful behaviour. The alternative and mitigating belief that God has a long-term plan allows for faith to be emphasised, as well as offering reassurance that poor socio-economic conditions are not an individual’s fault, and that they should not condemn themselves as sinful. As one
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Pastor put it, “if life is hard you think it’s not success, but God’s plan is succeeding… you say you can’t take any more, but you can.”

At the same time, the concept of individual spiritual responsibility allows someone to feel that they can take action to change their situation, giving them the idea of control, which is important for a sense of self-mastery, which is so important for self-esteem. The Kenyan state is so very distant and violent that it was simply viewed as being out of reach. However, if personal circumstances result from personal action, then this restores a sense of purpose and control to action and behaviour. It is not my contention that such challenges may actually be addressed per se, or be transformed, but that the concept of personal responsibility for life’s challenges through more devout living returns some sense of control – ie if my ‘mistakes’ may be addressed, those at least I can do something about. Therefore, individual responsibility for socio-economic conditions provided the means by which Pentecostals might at least feel some sense of hope, agency and control, even as this simultaneously contributed to a particular cultural hegemony that provided structural obstacles to their advance.

Conclusion

Religion in this context may be said to assist with individual mitigation of difficult circumstances, but not as bolstering a civil society that might assist in addressing inequitable power structures. Attempts by Pentecostals to understand, express and control their lifeworlds represented attempts at survival, rather than transformation or improvement in terms of addressing inequalities or improving well-being. It could well be argued that, in Kibera, neo-Pentecostal and Evangelical Christianity address “contemporary urban challenges… [giving] meaning to human life, while simultaneously equipping… adherents to be resourceful in meeting diverse challenges” (Chitando 2009, p 30). However, meaning is given very much to the extent that adherents feel that it is worth facing the diverse challenges they must meet in order to survive – rather than in the sense that they might be overcome.
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In a secularised world, a divide between religion and politics is many times taken for granted, but reality shows us that this is not always the case (Morier-Genoud 2007). In Mozambique, 20 percent of the population is Muslim, 30 percent Catholic, 30 percent Protestant, and indigenous African religions are prevalent. Religion plays a vital role in people’s daily lives, and faith-based organisations (FBOs) played an important role as drivers of change in fostering the peace agreement of 1992, promoting election transparency and governance monitoring.\(^1\)

The focus of this article is to study development activities within the Muslim community, mainly related to HIV/aids projects. We will explore the role of Muslim values, and Muslim FBOs as political drivers of change in a secular state where Islam is a minority religion. Furthermore, we want to find out whether there is a tendency to exclude/include certain topics or certain groups of people (non-Muslims; women) in Muslim FBOs that work with projects related to aids.

Muslim organisations have long worked with charity, including social and health issues, and have been involved in development projects. Since HIV is mainly spread through sexual intercourse, condom use and sexuality are vital topics to discuss in information about the epidemic. How do Muslim organisations work with questions related to aids? What is included or excluded, and on whose terms? Are issues such as polygamy and sexuality – according to the hegemonic aids discourse vital issues – excluded?
The study approach

The struggles of many social movements revolve around the inclusion of the voices of the excluded, the visibility of those made invisible. Such processes of inclusion, however, are complex, asymmetrical, and often contradictory (Lorenzoni and Follér 2011). In this article, we want to examine the politics of exclusion and inclusion within the Muslim community in Mozambique, focusing on work related to HIV/aids and with a gender approach.

In many societies, people living with HIV/aids are excluded from work and health services and ostracised by their own families. Community-based organisations (CBOs) working with human rights, discrimination/stigma, and social exclusion are rendering people living with HIV/aids (PLWHA) visible in society. However, the border between being included and excluded is blurred and precarious. Examining some voices from the Islamic community in Mozambique, and undertaking interviews with Muslim leaders, we want to analyse how the aids epidemic is contextualised.

Muslims in Mozambique have experienced conflicts with Christians since the Portuguese colonisation, but from 1987, Islam has been gradually transformed from a marginalised, and at times oppressed, religion into a socially and publicly important faith (Morier-Genoud 2007; von Sicard 2008). In 1983, FRELIMO officially recognised the new national Council of Muslims of Mozambique – CISLAMO (Conselho Islâmico de Moçambique).

The aids epidemic and the politics of aids in Mozambique

The response to aids in Mozambique dates back to 1986, when the first case was detected. The first national strategic plan was prepared 2000/2002 with a strong focus on prevention. From 2004, the epidemic was considered multi-sectoral, and besides the Ministry of Health, other ministries, the private sector and civil society – religious groups included – were invited to participate in the preventive work. Mozambique received aid from Brazil, and the Brazilian model was copied, as it was seen to be a successful aids-model (Follér 2011). The pillars of the programme were
Reviewing international experience and lessons from Kosovo prevention (especially promotion of condom use), and strengthening of the health centre infrastructure with units for HIV testing. The strong emphasis on condom use made religious communities hesitant to join the work. When more emphasis was directed into mitigation, eg through economic support to PLWHA and their families, as well as other prevention strategies, eg through propagating for abstinence and behavioural change with recommendation of having sexual relations at later age, an entry point for religious communities’ involvement was opened.

Challenges of Muslim participation: The Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO)

The HIV prevention campaigns with focus on condom use, the ‘Westernised’ or secular forms for governance and financing structures, government politics, as well as models for civil society organisation, all functioned as excluding factors for Muslim involvement in the work. The official view was that HIV was spread via occasional, transactional, and commercial sex, and the campaigns were organised around promoting either condom use or reduction of sexual partners (including none-acceptance of polygamous marriages). A response from Muslim leader Sheikh Muhammad Giva was that “… the campaigns were seen by Muslims as promoting immoralities, liberation of sex out of marriages with promotion of condom use…” (Interview, January 2012).

The majority of the Muslim communities are located in the northern and central parts of the country, and most of them support the political opposition to the governing party, FRELIMO. They feel neglected by the ruling elite, and excluded from access to development projects. Most HIV prevention campaigns have targeted youth and have prioritised the southern regions, where education infrastructure and human resources are better distributed than in the central and northern regions. The government’s neglect in relation to these parts led to protests and activities from communities and CSOs, Muslim included, with the result that some financial resources became available. Funds came partly from the National AIDS Council (CNCS), but mainly from the UN and bilateral agencies. There were strings attached to the funds, and the organisations had to comply with specific conditions that for various reasons excluded the
Muslim FBOs. They were politically and ideologically seen as being anti-FRELIMO, and thus not part of the hegemonic politics in the country.

The first national call for religious action related to aids came from the World Conference for Religion and Peace in 2003. Religious leaders from the major religions were invited to create an Inter-Religious Council, the aim of which was to formulate political and strategic goals with economic support from UNAIDS – the joint United Nations Programme on HIV/aids and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). CISLAMO received funds and started to implement small (from USD 10,000 to 100,000) community-based projects.

The focuses of CISLAMO’s projects were capacity-building, and the mosques became places of implementation for: 1) training of the Imams and their wives to promote and implement care and support to PLWHA; 2) training of youth activists from various mosques to promote prevention (abstinence and being faithful – in marriage); 3) implementation of community counselling and testing; 4) radio programmes with debates related to HIV prevention. The CISLAMO projects, with few exceptions, were implemented in mosques, mainstreaming messages into worship activities as well as organisation of specific events. The activities were therefore only targeting the Muslims who frequented mosques, excluding those who were not participating in mosque activities. A major challenge faced by CISLAMO was to include women, since they participate less in mosque activities, and to make sure women’s organisations had access to major funding, so they could implement long-term and scaled-up projects, with qualified human resources.

**CISLAMO projects on gender: The challenge of women participation**

During the year 2000, civil society and media highlighted religious aspects of a draft Family Law. The debates focused on the need for legal recognition of religious and common law marriages, since only civil marriages were legal. One contentious issue was Muslim opposition concerning polygamous marriages. CISLAMO was pro-polygamous marriages, but groups of Muslim women had demonstrated against polygamy. Some Muslim groups opposed the section of the law that would raise legal marriage age to 16 for both men and women (von Sicard 2008, p 484).
The final, approved version of the Family Law (10/2004) recognises the legal status of religious marriages, and it allows marriage before the age of 18\(^2\), for men and women alike, and only monogamous marriages are considered. However, as Sheikh Abdul Carimo Sau (General Secretary of CISLAMO) points out: “…the Family Law has been controversial, with none acceptance of polygamist marriages in our society where many families, religiously or traditionally married are already in that situation; with approval of marriage of children bellow 18 years… However, the Law is still important and useful for Mozambicans. The main challenge now is to make the law known and followed among our citizens throughout the country, including Muslims…” (Interview, 2012-01). Most communities still resolve family issues in ways based on non-institutional and traditional habits that are often patriarchal in their structure. They promote that girls marry prematurely. Since such habits are not acceptable neither to the Islamic Law (\textit{Sharía}) nor to Mozambican law (Sau 2008), CISLAMO decided in 2003 to develop projects that focus on Muslim women’s empowerment and on the promotion of their rights, and base them on both the Mozambican Family Law and on \textit{Sharía} (CISLAMO 2007).

The Muslim community in Mozambique funds many charity projects, but development projects on aids are not prioritised. This may, according to Sheikh Muhammad Cassamo Giva, be explained by “…the lack of awareness among our Muslim brothers on the importance of development projects and human rights, associated with low knowledge of Islam principles related to these issues. I’d say we have resources within our community to implement many projects, however those which are carried out are charity oriented [such as building mosques, paying salaries to the staff of the mosques, running Madrassas, etc] and not the ones directed towards development and human rights…” (Interview, January 2012).

Muslim women’s organisations in Mozambique are active in Maputo; few organisations are found in the provinces, CISLAMO making up the only exception as it is established in all provinces. However, CISLAMO structures are basically made out of men and therefore unlikely to be sensitive to women’s issues and gender balances. CISLAMO therefore contracted Muslim women activists of human rights (scholars of Education and Law) as consultants to deliver trainings on the rights of women
and children, and assured a fifty/fifty participation for men and women. Imams were then expected to disseminate the messages to the general public in their mosques and *madrassas*; female participants were expected to spread it within women’s meeting groups that met weekly in many communities. The projects were of short duration and not very effective. There is a gender difference in the Muslim community that – even though not explicitly pronounced – affects also attitudes, knowledge and preventive behaviour concerning HIV/aids. It is well known that women are at an informational disadvantage and are disproportionately vulnerable to infection, a phenomenon that is seen worldwide (Agadjanian 2005). The emerging women’s empowerment might give new visibility and become a driver for change to women.

**Conclusions**

Our study leads us to conclude that in Muslim movements, issues related to social life, health and HIV/aids are not prioritised. Thus, Muslims in Mozambique cannot be seen as main drivers for change when we consider development programmes and HIV/aids. “In the wake of the retreat of Muslim activists and as a consequence of the current policy of the party in power, it seems that activist Muslims have given up their direct political ambitions” (Morier-Genoud 2007, p 272). There are initiatives for more engagement in civil society, especially from women’s organisations, in the struggle against HIV, but especially in civic education. Both Muslim and Christian FBOs promote national development through free education services and the running of health services. They also teach citizenship in the communities and discuss ethical issues: against corruption, and for social responsibility, solidarity and peace.

In the projects we have examined, Muslim FBOs are acting gender inclusively, in the sense that women’s voices are becoming stronger within the Muslim communities. CISLAMO encourages women to participate in information events related to aids, which must be seen as an attempt to socially include Muslim women. Capacity-building directed to imams and their wives could be a starting point for further integration, but it is exclusive to participants in mosque activities – in itself a rather exclusive group.
However, in the discussions concerning the new Family Law, the gender imbalance was considered but not fully taken into consideration. Women have – in Muslim as in many other religious and secular organisations – been made invisible and been excluded from the religious order. In discussions concerning polygamy and the age of marriage, though, Muslim women became politically engaged in women’s groups that were working against polygamy.

There is an emphasis on Muslim identity as a vital core value in Muslim-run projects, and identity politics seem resilient – something that may be seen as excluding non-Muslims. On the other hand, the rest of society is hesitant towards and sometimes rejecting Muslim values. The rapid social transformation that takes place in the Mozambican society – be it called neo-liberal or Westernising – results in a paradox: secularisation leads to a fragmentation of earlier social norms and structures while at the same time religious identities, such as the Muslim, re-emerges in new forms of religiosity. Religion therefore must be seen as a political variable. Even if faith-based organisations are not the main drivers for development in Mozambique, today’s development cannot be understood without taking religion into account. In the multi-ethnic and multi-religious country’s ongoing reconciliation work, one important question is how faith-based organisations will influence and shape the burgeoning civil society in Mozambique.

Notes
1. Muslim and Christian organisations were members and participated in the Electoral and Development Observatories in partnership with secular academic organisations.
2. In Art #30, point 2 of the law “A woman or a man older than sixteen years, exception ally, can contract marriage…”

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Religion and grassroots politics in Africa


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Re-imagining faith-based and civil society organisations as agents of development in transitional polities in Africa

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Unlike many African countries – such as Nigeria with its civil war in the early 1960s, the Democratic Republic of Congo with its ongoing conflict, and Sudan and Somaliland, just to mention but a few – Cameroon has not suffered from war. However, this does not imply that Cameroon is free from human insecurity – that its population enjoys “safety from chronic threats as hunger, disease, and repression as well as protection from sudden and harmful disruptions in the patterns of daily lives – whether in homes, in jobs or in communities” (UNDP 1994). The imposed World Bank Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the 1980s posed a serious threat to human and national security. That the country evaded war, with the imposition of SAP coinciding with the country’s return to multiparty politics, was due to the intervention of supreme powers. The churches strongly appealed to their followers to pray, constantly, for peace, unity and serenity to reign in the country, so as to avoid the kinds of situations existing in neighbouring countries and within the Central African sub-region, where Cameroon remains an island of peace in a turbulent setting.

How do faith-based and civil society organisations (FBOs and CSOs) fit into these inter-related activities in Cameroon? The problem of human and national insecurity is regarded as a combination of social, political, and economic factors, and can therefore not be solved by addressing any one in isolation. Through their out-reach activities, FBOs and CSOs address the shortcomings in state delivery of basic needs; the lack of social
services such as healthcare, education, jobs and social security networks are seen as threats to individual and national security. They also educate poor people, who tend to lack awareness of laws and their rights, making structures of public accountability and transparency meaningful to them. A holistic, integrated approach, which combines a sustainable economic community with political and livelihood development policies, has the best chance to succeed, and for this there is need for a harmonious interface between the state, civil society and private sector.

**FBOs, CSOs and the democratisation conundrum in Cameroon:**

**Finding common grounds**

Globalisation, liberalisation, and the withdrawal of external support from Cold War alliances have placed enormous strains on some developing countries, Cameroon being one example. Best described as a “fragile or failed state”, Cameroon is a country with high levels of corruption, poverty and inequality and low levels of state capacity (Forje 2003, 2009, 2010; Mbembe 1992). Cameroon is particularly vulnerable to internal and external shocks, as well as to domestic and international conflicts.

The return to multi-party politics in Cameroon in the early 1990s and the drive towards democratisation in Sub-Saharan Africa should be understood and contextualised within the framework of Western hegemonic domination through liberal economics and market domination. It had a double-edged sword effect. The hegemonic centralised ethnic authoritarian regime was challenged by the forces of the people (Forje 2009). As Robert Mbe Akoko asserts (2007, p 186): “twin developments – the reconfiguring of global capitalism and the poor performance of African economies – would leave indelible imprints on many aspects of Cameroon’s national political and social life, aspects such as the emergence of hegemonic forces, the intensification of ethnic group politics, the growth of secessionist and irredentist movements, and regionalism” (see also Nyamnjoh 1999, 2002; Mbuagbo 2002).

Developments in Cameroon since the 1990s vindicate state victory over the people’s will, and, therefore, the current crisis of governance exposes and widens the gap between the governors and governed. Like orphans, the people turn to the churches for basic needs as well as spirit-
ual salvation, hoping that invincible forces will bring some sense to bear on the regime. State-Church relations in Cameroon are largely a function of opposing understandings and interpretations of the meaning of democracy. The nexus of good governance – transparent, impartial, accountable and redistributive functions of the state – and issues of civil liberties have become central in the churches’ concern to ensure that all Cameroonian political stake-holders adhere to agreed-upon democratic principles (Akoko 2007).

This serves to remind us of why one should not ghettoise religious civil society groups, giving them ‘minimal’ educational roles. Some of the deepest intellectual critiques of how the world is being governed – its trading systems, inequalities, and so on – have actually come from within faith-based institutions (Naidoo 2010). In Cameroon, Cardinal Tumi Christian (2012) stands out significantly as a critic of the failure of government and a defender of the rights of the people. Seen from this perspective, religious organisations are performing civic humanistic functions. In addition, the process of modernisation and the growing influence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have actually facilitated the growth of religion in many respects, as religions have taken advantage of the networking possibilities to organise on a global scale and to reach out to a wider audience. Religion is set to play a definitive role in contemporary society, if it is given the opportunity to adapt to the plurality and the progressive demands of the global challenges we face.

**Developing the capacity to deliver**

Faith-based and civil society organisations in Cameroon have been champions when it comes to defending the civil liberties of the people. This brought them into sharp confrontation with the state, and for once the churches were united around a common goal: to ensure a genuine democratisation and good governance process in the country. But on October 9, 2011, the presidential elections injected division within the united stance that the mainstream churches had taken so far on issues of good governance, corruption and poverty in Cameroon (The Horizon 2011; Asonganyi 2011; Lado 2011; Nyansako 2011). The situation displayed
an operational impasse within civil society that must be overcome, if the full potential of civil society is to be realised. The path towards resolving these challenges is mapped out against the backdrop of significant historical experiences of secular and religious communities, working together to advance justice. FBOs and CSOs are asked to engage in a respectful manner in their out-reach activities to society, and to use their influence and power for the good of society and humanity. Steps are taken by some clergy to find common grounds in issues concerning real-life needs of people, and groups work jointly to confront the numerous challenges facing humanity today.

Given the enormity of these challenges, it is imperative for secular and religious civil society to engage effectively, build relationships and find common ground, thereby creating the necessary capacity to address peoples’ basic challenges and deliver services effectively.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

The mainstream churches, in their capacity as faith-based organisations, have – in collaboration with other civil society organisations – helped create political and social awareness in the country. The emerging churches have also in different ways contributed to this process of change which has been designed to improve the wellbeing of the people. By creating awareness among the people, changing their lifestyle, and by providing basic needs to the vulnerable, they have qualified as social movements for constructive engagement and change. They also shepherd people towards spiritual uprightness, which helps in bringing moral and ethical rectitude as well as in laying the foundation for peace and stability.

Peace and stability are sustained on the shoulders of people and communities alone, not by state political actors. Seen within that context, FBOs and CSOs must work towards reconciliation, and rebuild themselves to ensure the development of society. Creating political institutions and ensuring their functionality is vital. These groups should move beyond their mission of evangelisation, in order to build a sustained society through reconciliation, consensus, dialogue and people-oriented focused development. The main challenge facing these two categories of civil society and the state is the issue of good leadership, required to foster
the good ideals of FBOs and CSOs. The challenge is even greater because of existing fragmentation of identities, and because of the mismatch between present-day challenges and exigencies and the ability or inability of existing institutions to address them promptly and objectively to the best satisfaction of the communities.

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Socially engaged Buddhism: Faith-inspired drivers of social and political change

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The twentieth century has seen the birth of a global socially and politically active form of Buddhism that emphasises Buddhism’s engagement with society. Engaged Buddhism is a non-centralised movement that emerged in response to multiple crises in modern Asia. It has been described as a modern form of Buddhism, influenced by modern, social, economic, psychological, and political forms of analysis of Western origin.

Engaged Buddhism is, in a certain sense, a result of the great tension modern Buddhists have felt between theoretical and idealised concepts, and the way these concepts have been used. Buddhism has been portrayed as otherworldly and unconcerned with the welfare of the people – a one-sided account that does not acknowledge the fact that Buddhist institutions at all times have been important actors in society. Buddhism has always been engaged, and monks and nuns have been involved with lay people as teachers, doctors, counsellors, advisers etc. However, the roles of monks and nuns have shifted over centuries and in different contexts. Governments have taken over many of the social activities that were traditionally the responsibility of temples and monks, including education, health care, social work, community support and development.

Socially engaged Buddhism

The term ‘engaged Buddhism’ was coined by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh in the 1950s to reveal the potential within Buddhism for social activism. It was used to describe those who promoted peace and social activism as well as environmental awareness (see Queen and King 1996). The expanded term, ‘socially engaged Buddhism,’ emerged during the 1980s and has been applied to a growing worldwide social movement, which seeks to adapt Buddhist principles and practices to contemporary social issues (ibid). Today, ‘engaged Buddhism’ covers many different activities, including social work, poverty-alleviation, ecol-
ogy and development programmes, political activism and human rights agitation. Socially engaged Buddhism also includes Buddhists’ important roles in situations of crisis and disaster. The common unifying component for people applying the label to their activities is that they perceive themselves as manifesting Buddhist principles in concrete activities, aimed to benefit people other than themselves, and that they especially seek to adapt Buddhist principles and practices to contemporary social issues. Apart from Thich Nhat Hanh, some important figures include the Dalai Lama from Tibet, Aung San Suu Kyi from Myanmar, the Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and the Thai social reformer Sulak Sivaraksa (Sulak Sivaraksa 1988; 1992).

Southeast Asia
For centuries, Buddhist temples have been centres of community activities and social engagement, and lay people have turned to the monks for support and advice. In many Southeast Asian contexts, new and modern forms of Buddhist practice and beliefs, grounded in the ancient form of Buddhism, continue to emerge. Beginning in the early 1970s, a handful of monks set up independent rural development projects, based on their interpretations of Buddhist teachings. They provided a sharp critique of the capitalism promoted by the government, fearing the effects of growing consumerism and the dependence of farmers on outside markets (see Darlington 1998). Since the 1980s, monks who are engaged in social activities have become increasingly involved in the creation of rural development projects, such as village credit unions and cooperatives, rice and buffalo banks, local handicraft production and marketing, as well as self-reliant and integrated agricultural programmes. Monks have also initiated projects specifically aimed at ecological conservation. The projects initiated by independent development monks are predominantly grassroots, small-scale activities.

Gender and socially engaged Buddhism
Despite the fact that gender equality is one of the foremost aims of the engaged Buddhist movement, there is little mention of leading socially
engaged women (Romberg 2002). However, many Buddhist nuns are socially engaged and possess great commitment to their work.

There is no single Buddhist approach to gender issues. The historical Buddha founded an order for women, wherein it was possible for women to receive Buddhist ordination. Every person, irrespective of caste and sex, was welcome to join the order. This was not a social reform to overcome existing inequalities, but rather a decision based on the insight that both women and men could reach the ultimate Buddhist goal, *nibbana*. As a consequence, both men and women should be given access to the ordained state, leave their lay life, and have the privilege of practicing Buddhism full time. Over the centuries the female ordination lineage has survived in the Mahayana tradition (practised mostly in East Asia) but not in the Theravada tradition (practised in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka). Women who aspire to become ordained in the Theravada tradition usually have to struggle with various difficulties. Not being fully accepted in the ordained role affects nuns’ religious standing and their possibilities to fulfil their monastic social role in relation to laity.

In recent decades, official forms of Buddhism, in countries like Thailand, have become less important for legitimising the state. In line with this, lay people have begun to ascribe educated, morally pure and socially engaged nuns religious legitimacy by recognising their religious leadership, treating them as religious leaders (see Falk 2007).

**Concluding remarks**

Engaged Buddhism can sometimes be seen as controversial simply because it challenges tradition by working in innovative ways. Social engagement may threaten the Buddhist ascetic vows of both monks and nuns, because of the lay character of the social activities, thereby undermining the religious authority of ordained persons. By extension, traditional interpreters of Buddhism fear that any erosion of the vital boundary between lay and religious realms will degrade the latter. The engaged Buddhists balance their roles as transmitters of traditions and values, transformers of tradition, and negotiators of tradition. But, as Sally King states: “The engaged Buddhist world is, finally, a globalized world” (King 2009, p 12).
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The Sarvodaya Shramadana movement and its ‘dual awakening’ concept

Anja Zalta

The Sarvodaya Shramadana movement is a self-governance movement that arose in Sri Lanka in 1958 as a manifestation of Buddhist revival that had begun in the late 19th century and continued into the 20th century and the post-colonial period.

Sarvodaya began as “an educational experiment,” as its founder, Dr Ariyaratne, called it. Forty high-school students and twelve teachers from Nalanda College, a Buddhist secondary school in Sri Lanka’s capital Colombo, went to live and work for two weeks in Kanatoluwa, a low-caste village. The work camp that they formed was called a shramadana (gift of labour) camp; students experienced a different aspect of their culture, and the project broke down barriers between the upper and lower castes.

After this first experience, Sarvodaya started to appeal to people to come forward and give whatever they could – their labour, their land, their skills, their wealth etc – to help alleviate the suffering of the poorest and the most powerless people living in rural as well as urban communities. In this way, they were not only able to construct wells for drinking water, set up irrigation tanks, and dig irrigation canals, but also to provide shelter for homeless people, construct access roads to villages, build community centres and schools as well as providing other community facilities in education and health care.

The movement began as a lay Buddhist movement with firm belief in the human potential for spiritual achievement. However, Sarvodaya went further than other groups in their revival, arguing that Buddhist liberation should involve not only individuals but society as well. The movement can thus also be described as an attempt to practice Buddha’s teachings
in the fields of development, welfare and social transformation. George D Bond (2004) analyses Gordon Whites’ definition of civil society and compares it with Sarvodaya’s idea, which resembles the conception of civil society proposed by White in that “civil society represents an intermediate associational realm between the family and the state populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests and values” (Manor et al 1999, in Bond 2004, p 104). But, as we have seen, Sarvodaya seeks to empower not just any civil society that will stand up against the state and the market; it seeks to create a citizenry that will embody Gandhian and Buddhist “interests and values” in generating alternatives to the state and the market (Bond 2004).

From the beginning, Sarvodaya constructed its distinctive form of socially engaged Buddhism from three strands: Gandhian ideals (Ariyaratne studied Gandhi’s ideas and worked with Gandhi’s successor, Vinoba Bhave, in India), Buddhist philosophy, and ecumenical spirituality.

“The awakening of all”

The goal of the Sarvodaya path is seen in its name: “the awakening (or uplifting) of all.” It aims at a dual liberation, of the individual as well as the society. These two forms of liberation are integrally related as a dual process, in which the liberation of the individual depends upon the liberation of society, and vice versa. In order to be able to see the supramundane meaning of the traditional Four Noble Truths (dukkha, samudaya, irodha and marga), Ariyaratne believes that people must see the mundane meaning of these truths. Sarvodaya has thus given the truths a social interpretation:

The first truth, dukkha, suffering or unsatisfactoriness, is ‘socially’ translated into “There is a decadent village.” This concrete form of suffering becomes the focus of mundane awakening. Villagers should recognise the problems of their social environment, such as egoism, possession, competition, harsh speech, destructive activity, inequality.

The second truth, samudaya, the cause of suffering, signifies that the decadent condition of the village has one or more causes. Sarvodaya teaches
that the causes lie in factors such as poverty, destructive engagement, disease, oppression, disunity, stagnation, ignorance.

The third truth, nirodha, cessation, understood in traditional Buddhism as an indicator of Nibbana, here becomes hope that the villagers’ suffering can cease on the basis of kind speech, constructive engagement, equal altruistic sharing, co-operation, love.

The means to problem solution lies in the fourth truth, marga, the way. Educational, cultural, spiritual, and health development, goal-oriented action, organisational development, Sarvodaya thought etc are marga factors.

Sarvodaya’s distinctive method for cultivating these ideas and for the implementation of its this-worldly path is shramadana. Sarvodaya volunteers assist villagers to organise shramadana camps to solve problems, such as digging a well or building a road. During the camp period, all participants follow the four Buddhist ethical principles for group behaviour, including generosity, kind speech, useful work, and equality. Ariyaratne sees these principles as the foundation of traditional village communal life, and the antithesis of modern, materialistic social life. Following them leads to a life governed by sharing and non-aggression, rather than individuality and competition.

In his Collected Works, Ariyaratne presents the whole idea behind Sarvodaya activities (2007, pp 190-206):

When a human being participates in any of Sarvodaya activities, his or her primary objective should be to practice four principles of Personality Awakening, which the Buddha has taught. The first principle is Loving Kindness (Metta) towards all beings. The Buddha in the Discourse on Loving Kindness (Karaniya Metta Sutra) has taught the importance of respecting and preserving all sentient beings. From one celled living beings to the most evolved of living beings, such as the humans, friendliness and respect have to be extended. Therefore, anybody joining the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement should be a person who accepts the principle not to destroy sentient beings, but to protect all life.

This idea of loving kindness, or metta, is translated into compassionate action (karuna) by undertaking physical or mental activities to alleviate
the suffering of humans and other sentient beings, whether it is by digging wells, or building schools, or helping the sick, or educating the children, or improving the economic life of all people, or teaching the Dhamma to improve their spiritual life. All such actions are expressions of compassion. A human being invariably gets the maximum mental impact from meritorious deeds in the form of dispassionate or altruistic joy (muditha). If human actions, over time, are guided by the three principles of metta, karuna and muditha, a person can progressively develop a state of mind which does not get disturbed by loss or gain, name or blame, success or failure.

The Buddhist path constitutes the crucial link between the individual and society in Sarvodaya’s scheme of awakening and development, providing a means to awaken self and society together. At times Ariyaratne compares Sarvodaya’s conception of the path to that of the Bodhisattva, the being who postpones his own enlightenment in order to remain in the world to work for the enlightenment of all. But, according to Ariyaratne (2007, p 190), “mundane awakening and social reform never become the supreme goals for Sarvodaya; the supreme goal remains the spiritual enlightenment of Nirvana.”

Transforming the consciousness of individuals and communities towards compassion and peace is the starting point of Sarvodaya’s plan to transform society, and an essential step towards building a just and peaceful world.¹

While cultivating this critical mass of spiritual consciousness, Sarvodaya seeks to develop the other two elements that it regards as essential for holistic social health: economy and power (Bond 2004). Sarvodaya has employed two terms in its recent plans and programmes to signify the creation of a new social order: gram swaraj – the liberation of the village through the creation of economic and social programmes at grassroots level; and deshodaya – the national and political outcome of the village liberation process.

Ultimately, Sarvodaya proposes to go beyond deshodaya, to vishvodaya, world awakening, as an essential antidote to the forces of globalisation and Westernisation.²
Drawing on its Buddhist, Gandhian and ecumenical heritage, Sarvodaya has shown that a materialistic philosophy based on desire creates structures of violence that lead the world away from peace, and closer to social and environmental destruction.

The solution takes the form of a new paradigm which deals with the new challenges of the post-colonial and post-industrial age. As David Korten noted (1995, p 11), the approach to development in this new age “must be guided by a new paradigm based on alternative ideas, values, social technique, and technology” which emphasises humanistic and spiritual values. Perhaps the most important theme that Sarvodaya can contribute to the global dialogue is its emphasis on “a development based on spirituality and spiritual consciousness” (Bond 2004, p 118), or as we should say: development based on ethics and ethic consciousness.

Notes

1. Sarvodaya’s approach to generating a critical mass of spiritual consciousness has focused on community peace meditations. During the last two decades, Sarvodaya has conducted over 150 mass meditation programmes in different parts of the country with 3,000 to 650,000 people participating. In all, nearly 2.7 million people have participated in these mass (ecumenical) meditations.

2. Even now Sarvodaya is establishing an international presence. These include Sarvodaya USA, Sarvodaya Twente in the Netherlands, Sarvodaya Japan, and Sarvodaya UK, Sarvodaya Canada, Sarvodaya Nepal, Sarvodaya Germany, Sarvodaya Japan.

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A wealth of sectarian developments characterise the religious landscape in Japan, where the rise and fall of Buddhist sects have been intertwined with the politico-military complex and management of the population, no less in more modern times than in previous eras (see Garon 1997). Mostly in this way, Buddhist institutions in Japan can be said to have been important ‘civil society’ groups. However, they have seldom acted more independently or as a challenge to political powers of the day. Occupation forces after 1945 stripped the Japanese state of its pre-war powers to police the internal affairs of religious organisations. Importantly, it also lost its power to quite so arbitrarily determine which religion was legally recognised and which constituted a ‘pseudo religion.’ Yet, wider society has not easily discarded pre-war distinctions drawn between ‘established’ (those endorsed by the state) and so-called new religions (those seen as a threat to the state), the latter still often being presumed to be superstitious evil ‘cults’ that reject science and swindle masses of followers (ibid). The national media and rightwing tabloids (see Hardacre 2003; Gamble and Watanabe 2004 respectively) have been instrumental in shaping public opinions in this regard. When we consider what turns out to be some of the most socially active groups in Japan, namely religious organisations, it is important to understand the politicisation that has characterised 20th century public opinions about such groups. There is quite a different understanding of them overseas.

*Soka Gakkai* is a Nichiren Buddhist lay organisation that arose in the late 1920s, when the Japanese educator Makiguchi Tsunesaburo took faith in Nichiren Shōshū, a Nichiren Buddhist sect that traces its history back to the 13th century. Soka Gakkai was first named Soka Kyōiku Gakkai – *Value Creating Educational Society*. It appeared at a time when
many new religious organisations arose during the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. With the rise of an increasingly oppressive fascist state ideology, these organisations were seen as a threat to the state and classified under the derogatory term ‘new religion,’ despite the fact that most of them were not very different in doctrine and beliefs from established Shinto, Buddhist and folk religions.

However, many of these movements attracted masses of followers, affected by industrialisation and the rise of a bureaucratic state. Soka Kyōiku Gakkai was not a mass movement but rather attracted educators, who were disillusioned and worried about the increasingly fascist education ideology, and who saw new hope in Makiguchi’s child-centric pedagogy. Makiguchi’s approach to education was based on a modification of the then widely studied neo-Kantian value system of truth goodness beauty. A keen reader of Kant, Makiguchi proposed the formula beauty – (bi) gain – (sen) goodness (shin) (Bethel 1994). Beauty referred to an individual’s aesthetic values, or subjective state; gain or benefit to the values of individuals as living in interdependent social totalities; and goodness to the well-being of human society generally. He believed that “human dignity arises from value creation” (ibid, p 54).

His theory of value creation (sōka) came to underpin the Soka movement. ‘Gain’ and ‘goodness’ both refer to the value of human life as contributor to the wider social good. Makiguchi rejected the idea of ‘holiness’ or ‘sacredness’ as separate values pertinent to the religious sphere, or indeed to the Japanese state as promoted through the ideology of State Shinto. Instead, he sought a scheme of values in which the meaning of education comes from “what people themselves see as the purpose of human life” (Makiguchi 1989, p 18), making his pedagogy radically different than the state, top-down form of education that permeated socialisation at that time. As he took faith in Nichiren Shōshū, he came to include the principles of the Lotus Sutra: that human beings possess infinite worth, dignity and equality. Based on this view, he opposed the state ideology, and refused to accept and pray to a Shinto talisman for Japan to win the war. The organisation was forced to disperse, and Makiguchi was imprisoned from July 1943 until his death in November 1944.
His ideas became the foundation for the Soka education system, as well as for Soka Gakkai’s emphasis on seeing individual well-being and social progress as embedded in each person’s development of social engagement in broader social and political issues, often implying a critical stance towards the Japanese political and religious establishment. After the war, the organisation under Josei Toda (Makiguchi’s closest disciple) grew rapidly beyond the realm of educators to become a Buddhist movement, emphasising Buddhism as something that should play itself out in daily life. With newly installed democratic rights, Soka Gakkai felt it pertinent to change a political culture that continued to cater to elite interests, and which was essentially the same that had so disastrously driven Japan to war and invasion of its Asian neighbours. It also relentlessly promoted Nichiren Buddhism as the highest form of human philosophy and practice. Not surprisingly, its relationship with conservative governments, other Buddhist and Shinto groups, the mass media, and society at large continued to be one of conflict, as it sought to change conventional values and understandings of Buddhism.

Under Daisaku Ikeda, who succeeded Toda in 1960, Soka Gakkai increased its social participation as a grassroots movement and even established its own political party in 1964. This continued to make the movement a real political force in Japanese society, and one of controversy.

From a sociological perspective, Soka Gakkai can be seen as accommodating changing circumstances in post-war Japanese society. Yet, its ability to attract 7-8 percent of the population in Japan, despite an unsupportive mass media, cannot be understood only in sociological terms, such as an effect of urbanisation and rapid social change. Buddhist doctrine, a political philosophy that fostered modern, social democratic sensibilities, and the daily Buddhist practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo have empowered millions of people to develop extensive grassroots networks that engage actively in wider issues of social concern. Believing that each individual is key to shaping their own life as well as that of a wider social reality was the foundation of Soka Gakkai’s view of nobility as the truest human condition. Its success is also connected to its critical stance towards pre- and post-war governments, based on its call for a more socially just society.
Long-term, organised social action and support for a political party is rooted in the followers’ interpretation of Nichiren and ‘Buddhism.’ In the words of Ikeda:

The Human Being is not a frail wretch at the mercy of fate. Shakyamuni insisted that to change oneself now is to change the future on a vast scale. The Western impression that Buddhism is all about meditation is alien to the spirit of Shakyamuni. The goal of Nichiren Buddhism is neither escape from reality nor passive acceptance. It is to live strongly, proactively, in such a way as to refine one’s own life and reform society through a constant exchange between the outside world and the individual’s inner world (Ikeda 2006).

My long-term, firsthand observations as well as hundreds of interviews support the idea of Soka Gakkai as a socially engaged form for Buddhism, trying to create a society of social justice, which is conspicuous and unusual in the Japanese context. The inclusion of this ideological side to Nichiren (see Satō 1999; Sueki 1999) makes Soka Gakkai an example of a politically important Buddhist movement. The reading of Nichiren’s political attitude as a call to promote what he considered ultimate good human principles in wider society is paramount to understanding how Soka Gakkai has defined its relationship to politics and political authority in the Japanese context. Nichiren Buddhism in Soka Gakkai became a form for Buddhist humanism, acting as an ethical filter for collective human agency. (For an extended discussion on Soka Gakkai’s function as an enduring social democratic force in the Japanese politics, see Fisker-Nielsen 2012.)

Let us now turn to another aspect of the organisation, namely, as a so-called faith-based organisation in the recent Great Eastern Japan Earthquake of March 2011. These observations are based on various interviews with Soka Gakkai members and officials, as well as on two field trips to Tohoku in June 2011 and April 2012.

What happened in Soka Gakkai at the time of the Tohoku disaster of March 2011? In Japan, mass media has focused much on NGOs’ and individual local people’s response and efforts, but it has been strikingly
silent on the role of FBOs, despite the fact that the few organisations that were able to respond immediately to and in the disaster areas were often religious organisations. Their organisational strength and preparedness and, most significantly, members who were themselves ‘victims’ turning into ‘volunteers,’ illuminated the strength of vast grassroots networks and local knowledge. Local temples and shrines still standing became spontaneous shelters. Religious organisations, such as Tenrikyo, established a disaster centre and built on its long history of volunteering and ability to dispatch its own technically equipped staff, who could remove debris. Other FBOs were able to send in small groups of individuals by the second and third day already, to offer assistance and encouragement. Because the devastation was so vast, few organisations – apart from the government and Japanese Self Defence Forces (SDF) who were deployed the next day – were able to assist immediately. For most NGOs, non-profit organisations and other groups it took 3-4 weeks to organise concrete assistance. For NGOs from outside the area, with no facilities to house volunteers during the first crucial weeks and months, relief efforts were very challenging.

The earthquake in Tohoku hit at 14:46; by 16:15 a central emergency communication centre had been organised at the Soka Gakkai headquarters in Tokyo, which communicated with the main Tohoku Centre in Sendai, the nearest big city to the epicentre. Meanwhile, neighbouring local Soka Gakkai organisations – members in Hokkaido, Niigata and Kobe who had all experienced big earthquakes and tsunamis in recent years – immediately put together emergency supplies and dispatched them to Iwate, one of the affected prefectures. Forty-two Soka Gakkai centres exist in Tohoku; at the peak, just after the disaster, there were 5,000 evacuees at these centres around Tohoku. To take in 5,000 people required dealing with a number of challenging tasks, such as providing water, toilets and the preparation of 15,000 meals a day. Making use of a professional transport company to get the goods to the main centres, Soka Gakkai sent 650,000 emergency items in the first month and a half.¹ The organisation also donated 540 million yen, about US$ 6.7 million, to various municipalities in the affected areas. In this way, the national organisation complemented the efforts at the local level.

¹
Thus, Soka Gakkai leaders turned their centres into evacuation places, and in many instances, Soka Gakkai evacuees in public evacuation centres took on leading roles, used as they were to participate in discussions and the organisation of events. The importance of quick decision-making to minimise fatigue and confusion has been commented on as the crucial factor in those evacuation centres that were run most successfully.

Their daily Buddhist practice and philosophy sustained them psychologically, and motivated them into action. They describe their Buddhist practice as “training in caring for others,” responding to any situation with courage, focusing on the person right in front of them. To describe Soka Gakkai members as ‘volunteers’ in this situation would probably be somewhat inaccurate; but through their ability to take action in such dire circumstances, they themselves overcame their ‘victimhood’ and encouraged others to do the same. The underlying conceptual and emotional challenge to see oneself as a resourceful individual is probably one of the most significant aspects in the long term. ‘Victims’ who turned out to be both volunteers and self-empowered individuals continue to tell their stories of overcoming often unimaginable hardships, expounding the possibility of hope as they draw on internal resources.

As indicated, it is difficult to place Soka Gakkai within the secular/religious divide, because the so-called religious is not something that lies outside human conduct. The faith of the followers lies in believing in the narrative of human beings as inherently capable and worthy of respect, and in manifesting this in interaction with others. The response to the Tohoku disaster is a conspicuous example of this. A desire for conceptual and existential change to empower people is what makes Soka Gakkai so successful. However, this has not happened without controversy, at least partly because of Soka Gakkai’s ability to organise a significant number of people politically in a way that fundamentally challenges other deep-seated social conventions about what Buddhism is, and how ‘religion’ ought to behave.

The tradition is not new, albeit perhaps rare in its success to expound the ultimate human good as an inner source of wisdom and courage to work for others. Unlike most other forms for Buddhism in Japan, the concept of wider social justice has been central to Soka Gakkai Buddhists
from the beginning. Their concept of justice is rooted in a philosophical position but plays itself squarely out in history; their belief is in human beings as creators of societies, and ideal human conduct is to act as an equal in a dignified manner, aiming towards a society of social justice and mutual flourishing. In the Japanese case, the creation of this kind of humanistic society has meant inevitable involvement to influence dominant political ideologies and practices. Thus, the most significant accomplishment of this Buddhist movement has been to consistently engage a vast number of ordinary people in the furthering of social issues for the common good. Buddhism is here clearly a practice that goes well beyond ceremonial services and the protection of the status quo that have characterised Japanese Buddhism.

Note

1. 60,000 portable toilet; 24,000 items of clothing; 4,700 blankets, futons and bed linen; 243,000 items of daily necessities; 296,000 food items; 40,600 medical supplies, and 33,400 other commodities, such as fuel, blood pressure gauge, bicycles, whiteboards, washing machines, dryers, kettles, portable cooking stoves, gas cartridges. By comparison, Japan Red Cross sent 132,000 blankets; 30,132 emergency kits; 13,500 sleeping kits, and a number of other items.

References


Socially engaged Buddhism


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The recent emergence of socially engaged Buddhism in South Korea

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Buddhism was not too concerned about the progress of Christianity in South Korea (hereafter Korea) until approximately in the 1990s. It simply and silently co-existed despite possible conflicts that could have presented themselves because of criticism about Buddhism, voiced by some Christians. The calmness of this typically Buddhist response to criticism naturally played an important role in the fact that religious harmony could exist within the confines of a common civil order in the Korean society.

However, this situation has shifted radically when, four years ago, the present government of Korea took office. The current president of Korea is a Christian. He has been brought up in a Christian family, and he has also served as an elder for a mega-Presbyterian church, in Korea referred to as the Somang (Hope) Church. In his cabinet, most ministers have a Christian background and only a few come from a Buddhist background. Evidence abound that his policies are flawed by Christian favouritism.

Korean Buddhists have traditionally adopted a policy of silence in matters which have to do with experiences of religious discrimination. However, at this time, their response is changing to one which unanimously opposes the current policy of religious favouritism as practiced by the President. A strong feeling of unity is emerging among Buddhist clergy and lay Buddhists, especially the socially engaged Buddhist intellectuals who oppose the present government policy, and a strong political force is emerging alongside this unity.

A key issue which provides a focus for this criticism is the question of religious education in private secondary schools. Socially engaged lay intellectual Buddhist groups, with the support of the Buddhist clergy, are questioning the propriety of government involvement that creates conflicts between Buddhists and Christians.
As is common also in the West, religiously funded private schools do not receive any kind of government subsidy, whether they be Christian or Buddhist. The fact that they teach their students according to their religious spirit and tradition is not a problem in Korea. The real problem relates to public secondary schools, established by Western missionaries in the early years of Korean Christianity and receiving subsidies from the Korean Ministry of Education. More than 70 percent of Korean secondary schools were started as Christian schools. They have been categorised as ‘public schools’ and have been able to maintain their religious education programmes, while receiving state subsidies. In comparison, Korean Buddhists established few secondary schools. In addition, and as a source of complication, the number of secular public schools established by the Korean government is not sufficient to meet the educational needs of all students, irrespective of their religious preferences. So, a non-Christian student living near a Christian school has to attend this local school.

Most Korean Buddhists used to understand and accept this situation and did not complain about the existence of religious education programmes in Christian schools receiving government subsidies and grants. However, recently, Buddhist students and teachers have been voicing their criticisms, complaining about the compulsory religious education programmes within these secondary schools. Arguments have been presented in judicial hearings to the effect that religious education programmes should not be compulsory to all students, irrespective of religion, as long as secondary schools are chosen according to the place of a student’s residence. The Christian schools were accordingly defeated, and most Korean mission schools are no longer free to offer any kind of formal religious education. Also, if students want to move to another school that accords with their religious identity, they are free to do so, if vacant seats can be found.

The existence of religious education programmes was criticised not on the basis of civil rights within a diverse religious context, but on a basis more closely related to questions that have to do with human rights: in this case, the claim or the right to have a purely secular education. Many persons have come to accept the perspective that religious matters belong to a purely private sphere of life, and that there is no legitimate place for
religion within the public domain. The national constitution of Korea speaks about freedom of religion, and about a separation between religion and state.

Ironically, however, pushing the logic of a separation between religion and state to an extreme – and against the intentions of believing Buddhists – had unintentional consequences. It is now claimed that all forms of religious education should be abandoned in Korean schools, and that religion should have no place in public life. Hence, in response, other Buddhist intellectual groups have attempted to revise this logic (to temper it), although not through open criticism but in ways that implicitly collaborate with it. This is especially the case with several Korean Buddhist professors and a well known member of the Buddhist clergy (monk Dobub, who leads a Buddhist ecological movement) who together issued a manifesto on August 24, 2011, *The Twenty First Century Ashoka Manifesto*, which argues the case for a healthy coexistence of religions in Korea. The drafters of this manifesto speak about the values of religious pluralism. In today’s Korea, these are not self-evident values, and the discussion continues.

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Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change

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Religious associations and communities are increasingly recognised as important social actors across the world, belying common European assumptions of a universal development path of secularisation. The last decades, states have taken a renewed interest in religious associations, an interest reflected as well within international development cooperation. While this has given augmented recognition to the role of religious actors, it has also brought to fore differences in perspectives and values, and raised issues on how to respect – or strive to overcome – these.

This volume addresses how religious faith can be a force for social change, where people mobilise around shared identities with spiritual as well as political objectives. Through case studies and analyses from across the world, the volume contributors discuss how faith-based communities manifest themselves as important social actors, and how they deal with sometimes conflicting values and notions of change, within their own communities and in relation to other actors.