





## 2 Religion and development policy: an ambiguous relationship

The Nigerian theologian Imasogie was one of the first who highlighted the problem of studying African traditional religions. He explained that due to the lack of the art of writing, till the advent of the white man, none of the manifestations of the African religious consciousness has been preserved in sacred scriptures. There is no written tradition available with which to compare the oral religious tradition which is available. In a recent publication on religious thoughts and political practice, however, Ellis and Ter Haar inform their readers about the significance of Africa's long oral tradition for the study of religion. In a continent, where powerful interests control the media and where news is often censored, people prefer information obtained in active conversation with friends on the streets or in the village compounds. The rumours of the 'pavement radio' contain no clear boundaries between the real and unreal, between the material and spiritual, and often refer to personal encounters with the invisible world.

Wim Westerman and Laurus van Essen (2007), *Religion as Driver of Change in Ugandan Education*, for the ICCO Alliance

### 1 Mind, heart and soul against poverty

Policy development related to religion and belief is a challenge of its own. In the Netherlands, religion is seen as a personal choice, far removed from the public domain. But that does not mean that policymakers can ignore religion as a driving force in society. Religious faith manifests itself in the public domain all over the world, especially in developing countries, where daily life is interwoven with religious belief and vice versa.

With these facts in mind, we consider it important for staff at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and for NGOs to have a sound understanding of the nature of religious belief. The World Bank drew this same conclusion several years ago in its famous report *Mind, heart and soul in the struggle against poverty*.<sup>1</sup> But a reappraisal of the relationship between religion and development policy reveals ambiguity. It is evident that many (though not all) conflicts are played out along religious and ethnic lines. Religion does indeed play a negative role in some conflicts and it also has a bad name in relation to gender equality, human rights, and the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Our first point, therefore, is that understanding the part played by religion in such situations is a precondition for managing conflict, advancing human rights and preventing HIV/AIDS. Our second point is that, as a significant source of human values, religion can inspire the pursuit of worthy goals, from reconciliation and poverty reduction to health care and education.

---

1 Marshall & Keough (2004)

There are many possible obstacles to an open discussion of the positive and negative aspects of religion in relation to development policy. One is the secular assumption that religion should stay out of any discussions about politics and that policymaking on this subject is invalid. The secular mind sees religion as merely one item in a set of personal convictions. Another obstacle is the notion that the influence of religion automatically declines in a prosperous society with high levels of science and technology. In this view, secularisation is associated with an increase in rationalism and modernity.

### European context

Our thinking about religion and secularisation is largely determined by the European context in which we live. For many of us, religion is a separate domain existing alongside other domains such as politics, economics, culture, etc. Within the domain of religion we see specific organisations, and specific attitudes – usually orthodox or conservative. Hence, secularisation could mean that membership of these organisations declines, that they find less support and that religion therefore retreats to the periphery.

But the global resurgence of religion indicates, among other things, that religion – in terms of believers affiliated to religious organisations and those holding associated ideas – is widespread in the non-Western world. In Europe, too, religious faith has become more evident, for instance in Christian and Muslim migrant communities. Furthermore, religion seems to offer an important source of identity for people and communities across the world in times of heightened insecurity and unrest. Finally, it is evident that religious belief is not confined to traditional religious organisations.<sup>2</sup> In Africa for example, among indigenous peoples, religion can barely be differentiated from other societal domains. Some languages do not even have a word for ‘religion’; life is steeped in belief and belief is life itself.

## 2 What do we mean by ‘religion’?

We have already used the word ‘religion’ without explicitly defining its meaning or the way it is used elsewhere in this work. The Advisory Council on International Affairs<sup>3</sup> describes religion as follows:

- *‘the belief in a non-empirically determined reality (power[s] or forces, usually referred to as God or gods) as a source of inspiration for human behaviour.’*

The concepts here are related to notions of ‘sacred’, ‘ultimate’, and ‘transcendent’. But the definition also includes a substantial element of ‘imparting significance’ and thus appears to subsume another concept:

- *‘religion is primarily considered in terms of its ascribed ability to provide life, or human existence, with a deeper meaning.’*

According to this definition, the meaning of ‘religion’ approximates to that of ‘ideology’. But however important the ideological aspect may be, people’s religious experiences may also

---

2 The report ‘God in the Netherlands’ (2007) focuses on the ongoing decline of the traditional churches. The Advisory Council for Government Policy in the Netherlands’ survey ‘Belief in the public domain’ (2006) also mentions various forms of religiosity and spirituality, some of which have an organised character.

3 Advisory Council on International Affairs (2005)

lead them to seek contact with what they understand to be a real, living ‘supernatural world’. In that case, religion implies

- *‘the belief in the existence of an invisible world, that is distinct but not separated from the visible one, and that is home to spiritual beings that are deemed to have effective powers over the material world.’<sup>4</sup>*

While ‘ideology’ can be understood as an outlook that is adopted consciously, this definition no longer covers the interaction with a ‘supernatural world’ as mentioned above. Believers variously describe this experience as ‘overpowering’, ‘surrender’, ‘calling’ and ‘inspiration’. Religion generally does imply an ideology, whereas, ideology does not, by definition, assume a relationship with a ‘supernatural world’.

From a policy standpoint, neither the truth content of the belief nor its relationship to non-empirically determined reality is important. What matters is that many people believe that it is true and that they testify to experiencing its reality. Within policy discourse, we need not understand religion, but we should indeed accept it as being part of other people’s reality. In other words, we should display ‘religious empathy’.<sup>5</sup> This does not entail subscribing to someone else’s *religious views* nor does it rule out thinking critically about them.

#### Religious resources

In the process of policy formation, it is important to have a clear picture of the ways in which religious faith finds expression in everyday empirical reality. On several occasions, Professor Gerrie ter Haar has elaborated on religion as a societal phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> She distinguishes between the following *religious resources* which, because of their interconnectedness, are relevant to policy development:

- *Spiritual experiences*: the religious experiences that people have in relation to the transcendent. ‘The transcendent’ is a collective term used to denote the supernatural world of the divine, spirits, gods, etc. Religious experiences may lay the foundation for individual and collective transformations.
- *Religious ideas*: visions of the cosmos, the world, life, nature, evil, the sacred, and virtues and values which give direction to human actions. These visions, virtues and values may be expressed through stories, and may also be concretised in tenets and rules.
- *Religious organisations*: religious movements, communities and organisations; their leaders and the networks within which they work together.
- *Religious practices*: the actions, customs, places and objects that connect the non-empirically-determined reality with the reality that is empirically determined.

From these religious sources we can go on to explore the theme of religion and development policy in greater depth. In a contextual analysis, religious sources can be linked to the eight Millennium Development Goals by analysing such questions as:

- How do religious resources influence the related goal?
- What is the nature of the influence?

---

4 See Gerrie ter Haar, Soesterberg (2005)

5 Wibren van der Burg

6 See Gerrie ter Haar and Stephen Ellis in *The European Journal of Development Research* (2006)

- Can this positive or negative influence be either strengthened or weakened by using development policy instruments?
- If so, what is the strategy, who are the partners, and what are the means?

In the case studies presented in this work, a range of religion-inspired initiatives in education, health care, peacebuilding, and ecology are assessed by means of this test battery. One of the conclusions is that it is vital to coordinate with religious actors, especially on service delivery by religious organisations and faith-based organisations working in education and health care, and with religious leaders on issues such as reconciliation and lifestyle. A second conclusion is that it is wise to avoid making generalisations about religions: in general, religious traditions are often less monolithic than outsiders think.

### 3 Harnessing religious resources

Policy debates tend to emphasise the usefulness of religion, which is why knowledge and use of the four religious resources are repeatedly employed in the context of the MDGs. The underlying assumption is that better knowledge and understanding of a nation's religion will promote better results in the area of poverty reduction. The case studies show how this works.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs operates from firmly within the context of functional rationality. The MDGs are clearly set out. Religious resources are perceived as drivers of change, and as part of a more comprehensive policy strategy. Within this functional rationality, it is important for governmental and non-governmental organisations to:

- gain knowledge about 'religious resources' (observed in terms of the constituents' spiritual experiences, religious ideas, religious organisations, and religious practices) determined per location (through contextual analysis);
- make contact with people and organisations involved in the related religious traditions;
- draw up cooperation agreements that integrate understanding of the role played by religious resources in the project locality.

A number of development cooperation agencies are working within faith-based traditions. For example, Cordaid has a high percentage of Catholic and ICCO a high percentage of Protestant partner organisations. Religious faith is not, by definition, central to these partnerships, nor do these partnerships exclusively involve a single religious tradition. Within the functional reality, it is the desired goal that gives direction to the partnership, not the faith-based identity (or otherwise) of the partner organisations.

### 4 Critique of the development model

Besides functional rationality, there is such a thing as substantial rationality (also known as 'value rationality'). It involves more than achieving goals, although goals and vision for future social structures are indeed part of the discussion. In debates where religious leaders engage in criticism of the development model, they tend to express a range of different visions for the ideal society, for the relationship between humans and the natural world, and on ultimate questions about good and evil. Religiously-inspired views of life, nature and the universe are often voiced in such discussions. Within the domain of development policy,

the discourse ultimately revolves around different models of development. Critics readily point out that at the moment, the prevailing concept of development is narrow and limited to political and economic dimensions. It accords secondary importance to other dimensions – social, cultural, environmental and spiritual. Critics who hold this view also claim that development is closely bound up with modernity based on the western model,<sup>7</sup> with a strong emphasis on personal interpretations of rationality (science and technology) and individualisation.

Other recurring points in discussions with religious leaders and organisations include the marginalisation of community values, indigenous traditions and the global commons<sup>8</sup> and the exclusion of certain groups of people. This religious critique is born out of an acute discomfort with materialism, individualism and the exclusion of people groups. This discomfort is ambiguous and is not limited to a single religious tradition. Indeed, it may cut across different religious traditions and be found as a common factor within the orthodox (traditional) and liberal (modern) strands of Islam, Christianity and Hinduism.

Policymakers need to be conscious of the critiques of the dominant development models and to take critics' aversion seriously. Failure to do so may actually strengthen radicalisation. To put it positively: addressing criticism and adjusting development models accordingly can contribute to prosperity and wellbeing. But for this to happen, the communication channels must remain open between representatives of different visions, between different schools of thought within religious traditions and between different religious traditions and secular groups. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and non-governmental development organisations can play an active role in this dialogue.

## 5 Church, state, and society

Resistance to a close connection between religion and development policy is usually based on concepts about the separation of 'church'<sup>9</sup> and state. Basically, the separation of church and state means that:

- *governments are completely impartial and do not give preferential treatment to any religious group or tradition*
- *religious organisations do not strive for political power*

Scott M. Thomas<sup>10</sup> and others have shown that in the Western world, this principle has led to different state models. The French model bears no resemblance to that found in the United States. The Dutch model is different again, since in the Netherlands, the monarch is supposed to be a member of the Dutch Protestant Church (previously the Dutch Reformed Church). In the United Kingdom, the monarch is the supreme governor of the Anglican Church. In France, any visible manifestation of religion in the public domain is strictly taboo. In the United States, the separation of church and state does not preclude the use of religious language within public and political domains as a matter of course. In all the countries mentioned, as indeed with NGOs, religious movements and faith-based

---

7 See Adam Szirmai, *The Dynamics of Socio-Economic Development* (1997), p.8.

8 *Global commons*, or common good. In the popular meaning, the common good describes a specific 'good' that is shared and beneficial for all (or most) members of a given community. This definition is standard in philosophy, ethics, and political science.

9 In this work, the word 'church' is used to mean any 'religious organisation'.

10 Thomas (2005)

organisations have plenty of leeway to participate in the public debate, by providing public services and influencing policy by lobbying. The formation of faith-based political parties does not necessarily conflict with the principle of the separation of church and state within a democratic system.

Within the domain of international cooperation, separation of church and state is not a fixed precondition. However, it is a hallmark of the so-called 'secular state'. In the context of international human rights standards, the major anchor point in this respect is freedom of religion or belief, which has, inter alia, been defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 18):

*'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.'*

The separation of State and church was a recurrent issue during the negotiations on freedom of religion or belief. Eventually, in General Comment 22, the Human Rights Committee concluded that freedom of religion or belief does not require separation of state and church, provided that the state does not discriminate on the basis of religion or belief.

From a development perspective, the actual relationships between religions in developing countries appear to be more significant than an official, formally documented relationship between church and state or the legal formulations of religious freedom.

Policymakers should consider the following relevant questions:

- Within a secular state: how much space there is for religion, and therefore for religious organisations and faith-based organisation? What are the repercussions of partnership with such organisations?
- In a state where one religion predominates: is there a focus on freedom for the followers of non-religious traditions and of other religious traditions? Are people allowed the freedom to withdraw from the dominant religious tradition? These questions are also relevant in considering the intended or unintended consequences of partnership with minority groups, faith-based or otherwise.
- In any secular or religious state that contains various religious and non-religious traditions, the relationships between these groupings are all-important. Is there mutual cooperation or dialogue among the religious groups, or actual or potential tensions? What will be the likely repercussions if a Dutch development organisation opts for partnership with an organisation that has roots in one of these traditions?

## **6 Missionary work and development**

A number of non-governmental development organisations in the Netherlands directly originate from Protestant and Catholic missionary work. Hence, from the historical point of view there may be a relationship, though a complex one, between missionary work on the one hand and colonialism and capitalism on the other. Missionary work has also done much to inculcate respect for other cultures and, more recently, for public support for development work. Historically, the earliest experience of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue and reciprocity in relations between 'north' and 'south' was in missionary work. Nowadays, the term 'missionary work' covers a range of activities.



- The missionary work conducted by the mainstream church communities in the Netherlands focuses on supporting church communities in developing countries, among other places. For instance, the work may involve educational and training programmes of an academic and non-academic kind. In addition, there is a considerable focus on dialogue within the broader Christian tradition and with other faiths.
- The missionary work of Pentecostals and Evangelicals is intensely oriented toward securing adherents in other countries.<sup>11</sup> It is usually characterised by strong leadership and a blend of orthodoxy and personal perception. The Pentecostal and Evangelical movements are currently making many converts in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Within existing religious communities, a great deal of care and attention is given to members' material welfare.

Other religious traditions have less of a missionary focus, with the notable exception of Islam, which, like Christianity and secularism, makes universalist claims. Obviously, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not subsidise missionary work as such because the proselytism criteria rule this out. Nevertheless, the effect of missionary work may indeed be relevant to development work, especially in terms of community-building, mutual assistance, and economic participation. From the official standpoint of development policy, a factor that tends to complicate collaboration with faith-based organisations in terms of service delivery (for instance in health care and education), is that their activities may also lead to clients' becoming interested in the religious tradition they have benefited from in the field. The borderline between development and missionary work is therefore not always clear-cut. Others would argue, however, that it is not possible to be completely value-free in these areas: support for government-run health and educational programmes can also imply support for Western secular lifestyle and culture.

At this stage, the proselytism criteria need not be discussed. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should distance itself from religious organisations' activities directed at winning converts. It is important, at the same time, to be aware of the societal effects of religious organisations, intended and unintended, positive and negative.

## 7 Implications for development policy

*In practice, do development organisations find religion to be a useful instrument in striving for sustainable development?*

- The case studies – a limited selection from the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and participating NGOs – show a mixed picture, but the experiences to date are mainly positive. Religious resources often act as drivers of change and can therefore be utilised as functional rationality.

*What dilemmas, sensitivities, and barriers have been encountered?*

- A number of religious resources can indeed be tapped in order to achieve certain development goals (functional rationality). However, religious bodies may also adopt a critical attitude towards the dominant development model (substantial rationality).
- From the policy standpoint, it is important to keep the communication channels open with such critics, and to clearly demarcate one's own position in order to avoid the pitfalls of cultural relativism. The guidelines are the international human rights norms.

---

11 See Phillip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (2002) and Frans Wijzen & Robert Schreiter (ed.) (2007)



- In certain situations, religion is part of the problem rather than the solution. This is true where conflicts and tensions play themselves out along religious lines, and when religious leaders exercise their power negatively. Religious traditions can also hinder development, for instance, when women are oppressed.
- It is also important to find out about the local religion and its role and to be aware of the diversity and dynamics within different religious traditions. The views of religious leaders and their supporters do not always coincide.
- Cooperation with religious and faith-based organisations assumes at least some insight into the religious tradition in question, especially concerning the tradition's societal expressions and dynamics. This insight is sometimes lacking, especially in the intensely secularised context of the Netherlands.
- A basic knowledge and understanding is relatively simple to acquire. However, it is not advisable, for a governmental or non-governmental development organisation to get involved in theological discussions arising within the tradition in question.<sup>12</sup>
- In practice, NGOs have more opportunities to work with faith-based partner organisations than governmental organisations do.

*In order to tap religious resources, what skills and knowledge do development organisations need?*

- Religious empathy – in other words, the ability to identify with the significance that religion has for the other person. In addition, it is important to be open, willing to engage in dialogue, and conscious of one's own presuppositions.
- Knowledge of the religious map of the country in question: the relationship between 'church' and state, the relationship between the various religious traditions, religious sensitivities, and religious organisations and leaders.
- Awareness of one's own ideological and religious identity at the level of the organisation and its staff, and within one's own society.
- The ability, at policy level, to formulate common objectives and the result envisioned.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Berger, *Religion and Development Aid. The special case of Islam* (2006)

## Bibliography

- Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV). 2005. *The Influence of Culture and Religion on Development. Stimulus or Stagnation?* The Hague
- Berger, Maurits. 2006. *Religion and development aid. The special case of Islam*. The Hague: Clingendael
- Beyer, Peter. 2006. *Religions in global society*. London / New York: Routledge
- Donk, W.B.H.J. van de, et al. (eds.). 2006. *Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie*. The Hague: Advisory Council on Government Policy
- Haar, Gerrie ter and James J. Busuttil (eds). 2005. *Bridge or Barrier: Religion, Violence and Visions for Peace*. Leiden/Boston: Brill
- Haar, Gerrie ter. 2005. *Religion: a source for human rights and development cooperation*, Soesterberg: BBO
- Haar, Gerrie ter and Stephen Ellis. *The role of religion in development: towards a new relationship between the European Union and Africa*. European Journal of Development Research, Vol. 18, No. 3, September 2006. Geneva: European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes
- Hanson, Eric O. 2006. *Religion and politics in the international system today*, New York: Cambridge University Press
- Jong, Cornelis D. 2000. *The freedom of thought, conscience and religion in the United Nations (1946 – 1992)*. Antwerpen – Groningen-Oxford: Intersentia
- Klein Goldwijk, Berma (ed.). 2007. *Religion, International Relations and Development Cooperation*. Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers
- Marshall, Katherine and Lucy Keough. 2004. *Mind, heart and soul in the fight against poverty*, Washington DC: The World Bank
- Thomas, Scott M. 2005. *The global resurgence of religion and the transformation of international relations. The struggle for the soul of the twenty-first century*. New York - Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan
- Tyndale, Wendy R. 2004. *Religion and the Millennium Development Goals: Whose agenda?* Utrecht: Knowledge Centre Religion and Development
- Tyndale, Wendy R. 2006. *Visions of Development. Faith-based Initiatives*. Aldershot: Ashgates Publishing Limited
- Wijzen, Frans, and Robert Schreiter (eds.). 2007. *Global Christianity: Contested Claims*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi