An Uncomfortable Instrument: The Weak Vilification of Religion in Development Discourse

(Conference paper by Ton Groeneweg)

The field of development work and the ensuing discourse is riven by dilemmas and contradictions. This both holds for its practical involvements (in a myriad of forms and contexts) and for its discursive reflections. Of course this has everything to do with the bewildering complexity of the issue of development itself. Once we start to speak about human development, it rapidly becomes clear that we are dealing with an elusive topic that cuts across a range of issues, ideologies and disciplines. It touches upon the fields of anthropology, sociology, political science, economy, law, philosophy, and probably a great many others – both in their academic endeavors and practical manifestations. One of the things, in fact, that makes the development discourse such an interesting area of reflection and debate is that by itself it incorporates an impressive interdisciplinary field of exploration.

And all of this is constantly sharpened by the sense of urgency that is inherent in the acute needs and existential insecurities that human beings are facing around the world, whether they relate to physical deprivation, rights violations, environmental destruction or armed conflict.

In a particular way, the dilemmas and contradictions that the development discourse is facing today become apparent in issues touching upon the topic of religion. And this, it seems, in an increasing manner. In this paper I will explore how the controversies around the topic of religion might reveal an inherent tension in the development discourse itself and the reigning ideology behind it. This tension resides in the complicated and uneasy relationship between religion and development discourse, and finds expression through what I refer to in my title as the 'weak' vilification of religion in development. I will come to this in a minute.

Attention for the specific challenges that emerge from the interaction of religious issues and development processes is relatively new. For a long time, the development discourse has been driven by its own version of the 'secularization thesis'.[1] Through modernization, the influence of religion would gradually recede in developing countries, in a similar way as this had happened in large parts of the Western hemisphere. This perception already called for a certain 'vilification' of religion, a rather *strong* version in fact, as religion was seen as one of the obstacles to be overcome for true human development to take place.

Now this picture, in recent years, has thoroughly changed, or at least been nuanced and complicated. Partly matched by the acclaimed 'resurgence of religion' at the world scene, within the more limited scope of development issues, it has become apparent that modernization processes can very well be accompanied by continued or even increased forms of religious belief and practice.[2] In particular, various forms of religious revivalism seem to be very conducive to modernizing trends in very different contexts. This realization has already created its own body of research and reflection, and brings new dilemmas and contradictions, also into the field of development practice.[3] Apart from the many instances where there is no tension at all between religious and development perspectives, in

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[1] See Deneulin & Rakodi: 'Revisiting Religion: Development Studies Thirty Years On.' In: *World Development* (2010) doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2010.05.007

[2] See e.g. the work of José Casanova, a.o. his *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, 1994). See also note 15.

[3] Some of them are addressed in the useful overview that Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano give in their *Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script* (London: Zed Books 2009).

particular ideas and forms of religious practice that thrive within religious revival movements do not always easily synchronize (to put it mildly) with the reigning secular concepts of development. This already hints at one of the core tensions in development discourse as such, between the acknowledgment of the perspective of local actors as one of the conditions for sustainable development, and the secular values and convictions of development practitioners themselves. This leads to what I call the 'weak' vilification of religion in development discourse, a half-hearted relationship, it seems, of outward acceptance (in the name of values like pluralism, tolerance and respect) but of inward rejection (in the name of secular principles) of many religious beliefs and practices.

One of the ways in which this works out in development practice, is that religion comes to be handled in an instrumental way. Most development agencies work with religious actors for the pursuit of secular goals, and deal with them as long as they do not contradict the overtly stated universalized concepts of development, like that of human rights. This remains, in many instances, an uneasy relationship.[4] It is apparent that many religious actors might hold opinions that, if overtly stated and practiced, would contradict the secular development standards. Gender issues are a telling example.[5] Development practitioners have to accept this instrumental predicament to a certain extent, and keep on working with it, while acknowledging its inherent contradictions.

Now what I would like to do in this paper is to show that the discomfort surrounding the topic of religion in development is at least partly due to certain presumptions within the development discourse itself, and its instrumental way of dealing with religious agents and religious practices. A possible way out of this discomfort could be envisaged if the development discourse would be more conscious and self-critical with regard to these presumptions, which is not immediately the same as simply giving them up. I will do this by focusing on one particular example of religious revivalism, the so-called da'wa movement that emerged and prospered by the end of the 20th century in urban Egypt. I am drawing here almost exclusively on two fairly recent anthropological studies on this movement, that by themselves already raise substantial questions with regard to the way religious agency is generally perceived. The studies I am referring to are the by now well-known book of Saba Mahmood, "Politics of Piety", and the lesser known (but no less fundamental) "The Ethical Soundscape" by Charles Hirschkind. Both studies are closely related, not only because of their shared topic of research, but also because they draw on a very similar theoretical and philosophical framework, strongly inspired by the work of Talal Asad.[6]

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[4] Interesting practical cases of this uneasy relationship are given in the *Handbook Religion and Development*, published by the Dutch *Knowledge Centre Religion and Development* (cf. www.religion-and-development.nl).
[5] Even if it is granted that women and men are created equal, certain interpretations of the perception that they have been assigned different roles by the Creator already conflict with more secular perceptions of gender equality.
[6] Saba Mahmood: *Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2005). Charles Hirschkind: *The Ethical Soundscape. Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (Columbia University Press, 2006). Both these studies date back from well before the recent events in the Middle East, so there is no reference to these events either in this paper. The dynamics of the da'wa movement, however, belong very much to the 'pre-history' of the developments that have unfolded in Egypt over the past year, as both authors have commented upon in other places. See Charles Hirschkind: 'The Road to Tahrir', in: *Economic & Political Weekly*, February 12, 2011. And Saba Mahmood: 'The Architects of the Egyptian Revolution'. In: *The Nation*, February 14, 2011.

A word about the da'wa movement for a start.[7] The word 'da'wa' is a Qur'anic concept, meaning 'call' or 'summon', and it stands for the appeal to follow the true faith, Islam. It is used for a variety of activities, including the strive for correct social behavior and increased attention to faith practices. Hence it has connotations of 'piety' and 'devotion', as well as of what in Christian terms is called 'evangelization'. In the context of the Egyptian movement central in the books of Mahmood and Hirschkind, it basically refers to a broad and diverse popular movement in which Islamic values and ideas are expressed, discussed and practiced in all forms of daily life, both private and public. As such, the da'wa movement is part of and to some extent coincides with the more generic term 'Islamic revival movement', a large and very differentiated phenomenon that has unfolded in the Muslim world roughly since the 1970's, with roots in the anti-colonial movements of the 19th and early 20th century.[8] The term describes the obvious and visible fact that Islam, in very different and sometimes opposing ways, has increasingly become a frame of reference for social, political and cultural life in almost all countries where Muslims form a considerable portion of the population. This development finds its visible expression in various forms of attire: the wearing of beards and headscarves and other dress codes, but also gave rise to a variety of piety movements, Islamic welfare institutions, Qur'anic study groups and political parties that gradually permeated many social and also political spheres in Muslim countries, although of course in very different ways and to many different degrees. Even where it affects a relatively small portion of the society, its presence and visibility is conspicuous and challenges our understanding of the relation between religion and modernization, religion and secularization, or – for that matter – religion and development. The way Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind describe it, the da'wa movement in Egypt is primarily a movement of ethical reform. Although in many ways it is close to political movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, it is also distinct from it in this respect, and is even criticized for drawing attention away from issues of political reform.[9]

The da'wa movement in Egypt partially developed in response to the centralizing policies of the post-colonial state in the 1950s, where all spheres of life, including religious practice and instruction, were gradually brought under the sphere of influence of the state. In contrast to state controlled centers of instruction, Egypt saw the rise of a hausse of popular and alternative forms of religious formation. The studies of Mahmood and Hirschkind each focus on one such form of alternative religious practice, and its social, cultural and political ramifications. Starting from a critical feminist perspective, Saba Mahmood delves into the popular and widespread phenomenon of women groups, which gathered regularly around popular women preachers in neighborhood mosques. In these groups women discussed religious texts in relation to issues in their daily lives, with a general focus on how to live a proper life in accordance with the will of God, and centered around notions as modesty and piety. Charles Hirschkind, in turn, explores the phenomenon of audiotaped sermons by popular Islamic preachers, that were recorded, reproduced and distributed by the millions around the Muslim world in the 1980s and '90s, also particularly in Egypt. These taped sermons were listened to not only in religious instruction classes, but also in the privacy of homes, and even in the

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[7] Both Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind give a detailed account of the Egyptian da'wa movement in particular, and of how it developed within the specific religious traditions and socio-political dynamics of modern Egyptian history. For a more general sketch of the da'wa principles and their place in Islamic culture and society, see e.g. Deneulin & Bano, in particular pp. 88-93 (see note 3).
[8] Mahmood and Hirschkind both give the historical background of the da'wa movement, albeit from a different perspective, in the second chapter of their respective books.
[9] See Saba Mahmood, p. 53.

buzzing cacophony of urban market places and transport facilities. So already in defiance of more privatized conceptions of religious adherence, these sermons became part of the 'urban soundscape', like popular music and film songs do, and (as we will see) partly in competition with these.

Now it would be easy to see these practices, as is often indeed the case, as classic examples of religious indoctrination.[10] In the women mosque groups, the participants are taught and disciplined to adopt patriarchal norms that seriously limit their sphere of agency. The pervasiveness of religious oratory in the 'soundscape' of urban life would similarly influence the minds and hearts of the general public. Whether all of this happens deliberately or not, the emerging picture is that of 'passive' victims, who are exposed to questionable utterances and ideas, at least from a development perspective, and cannot, by lack of alternative frameworks, but adopt this ideology and start acting upon it. A lot of effort in the years after 9/11 has indeed been dedicated, also under the umbrella of 'development initiatives', to oppose the spread of religious orthodoxy, which was seen as the breeding ground for intolerant, violent behavior and, ultimately, terrorism.[11] Even if this picture has in the meantime become more nuanced, I would just like to point out that this perception already betrays a particular conception of how religious agency works, and how it can be influenced in an instrumental way. What you have is the conspicuous presence of religious ideas that are considered to be detrimental to either specific interests (like national security issues) or genuine development objectives. These ideas, once adopted, are considered to lead to unwanted behavior. So what do you do? You try to oppose the spread of these ideas, or replace them with more desirable ideologies. Quite a number of development initiatives in recent years are following this logic, even until today.[12] This line of thinking presupposes a certain relationship between ideas and practice, consciousness and behavior, and ultimately between language and action.[13]

The presumption is always that there are 'ordinary' Muslims who are the passive victims of dubious religious ideas and ideologies, and the way to counter this takes the form of a 'battle of ideas'. So even if there is a clear engagement with internal religious debates (e.g. the promotion of more 'liberal' concepts of religious understanding against perceived tendencies of fundamentalism and orthodoxy),[14] the perception of how religious ideas relate to religious practice and action, remains very much within an instrumental framework, on the basis of a rather crude understanding of how ideas translate into action. Now, the intricate analysis that Mahmood and Hirschkind adapt to their respective case studies gradually disturbs this picture and reveals a more complex interaction between religious belief and practice, between ideas and human agency, and maybe also between religion and development.

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[10] Both Mahmood and Hirschkind give several references to such views.

[11] Mahmood and Hirschkind have together analyzed this in the context of the US government sponsored 'Muslim Outreach' program. See Charles Hirschkind & Saba Mahmood: 'Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency'. In: *Anthropological Quarterly*, Spring 2002, 339-354.

[12] Examples could be given, also from the practice of my own organization *Mensen met een Missie*. The argument here is not that these interventions are wrong per se, but that they tend to be very limited in their reach, and miss an entire dimension of religious agency (see below).

[13] I address the link between a certain ideology of language and an instrumental theory of agency more elaborately in my *'Engaging the Faithful: Moving Beyond the Instrumental Predicament'* (forthcoming).

[14] Cf. Ward Berenschot: 'Engaging the Faithful: Pluralism, Civil Society and Religious Identity in Indonesia'. An exploratory study for Mensen met een Missie (2010).

There is no way I can do justice here to the complexity of the arguments in these rich and provocative books. Instead I would just like to borrow one example from each of these authors, that hopefully will illustrate something of the potential that these analyses have for our present discussion on religion and development discourse.

In one of the sessions of a women's group that she participated in, Saba Mahmood witnessed the following discussion on the hijab, the veil, and its meaning for the women in the group, in particular the way the wearing of the veil should match with the inward, virtuous feeling of shyness [*al-hayaa*]. If the hijab is worn without this corresponding inner feeling, it would be "hypocritical" and thus a sinful form of behavior. Now this is not an easy match, as one of the women who was struggling with this desired feeling of shyness indicated, until she realized that "I had to create it first. I realized that making it in yourself is not hypocrisy, and that eventually your inside learns to have al-hayaa too" (Saba Mahmood, p. 156). Another young woman then joins in and tells: " In the beginning when you wear it, you're embarrassed and don't want to wear it because people say that you look older and unattractive, that you won't get married, and will never find a husband. But you *must* wear the veil, first because it is God's command, and then, with time, because your inside learns to feel shy without the veil, and if you take it off, your entire being feels uncomfortable about it." (ibid. p. 157)

What is striking about this brief discussion, as Saba Mahmood analyzes it, is that it challenges our expectations with regard to how an inward feeling of shyness is related to the expression of this feeling in outward behavior, i.e. the wearing of the hijab. It is not as if the correspondence between the two does not matter, but the lack of this match between them does not lead to the rejection of the practice as insincere or hypocritical, but to a renewed effort to make the two coincide. This is done by a disciplinary practice of adopting the veil, until in the end an inner feeling of shyness is created that makes the wearing of the hijab a part of the experience of the self. So adopting the veil is not a passive act put upon these women, but requires considerable 'work' to be done by the women in order to make their outside behavior correspond to their inside sensibilities. This 'work' in turn allows the women to acquire a certain self-esteem and feeling of accomplishment, corresponding to their sense of selfhood. So it creates a certain form of agency, instead of taking agency simply away from them, as the suggestion of a mere adoption of the patriarchal norm would have it. That it is a different form of agency than a classic feminist perspective would have it, focusing on women's liberation, is also apparent, although in some form it has an empowering effect.

Now I am not suggesting that something completely different suddenly emerges here, that the view of veiling as adopting a patriarchal norm is simply wrong, and that now suddenly the hijab turns into an vehicle of female empowerment. There remain considerable critical and problematic questions to be attached to these practices.[15] I only suggest, as I believe Saba Mahmood is doing, that the mere view of veiling as the passive adoption of an outside norm, and the hijab as the representation of a religiously motivated idea that leads to certain behavior, tends to *miss* something that is equally apparent in the intricate interactions and deliberations of the women's groups. This has everything to do with the "*work that bodily practices perform*" (ibid. p. 160; Saba Mahmood's italics) in creating forms of female agency that we could call 'religious agency' (if there is such a thing), and that are not simply the expression of certain ideas or convictions, but relate in a much more complex way to the normative frameworks of the particular religious tradition of which they are a part, and might create

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[15] See e.g. José Casanova and Anne Phillips: 'A Debate on the Public Role of Religion and its Social and Gender Implications'. UNRISD Gender and Development Programme Paper Number 5 (September 2009).

forms of agency that do not primarily draw their impetus from challenging these normative frameworks. These 'embodiment practices' also form, as I suggest in this paper, a major challenge to the common instrumental way of dealing with religious issues in development interventions.

Similar reflections we find in Charles Hirschkind's book. In an intriguing and sophisticated analysis of the listening practices that figure around the taped sermons in modern Egypt, he shows how 'listening' here is much more than the mere passive acquisition of the *meaning* of religious oratory. While the circumstances in which the taped sermons figure (the buzzing market places, the cramped private homes of modern Cairo) seem particularly unfavorable to a receptive religious attitude, he shows instead how the practices that have developed among the listeners to these sermon tapes are intimately attuned to the circumstances in which they circulate. They are listened to in a semi-distracted manner, a form of 'ethical relaxation' that nevertheless has great impact on the experiences and sensibilities of the listeners, but in a semi-conscious, almost physical manner. Their significance lies "at the level of the somatic more than the programmatic" (Charles Hirschkind, p. 82) and hence "what is acquired through the practice are less honed dispositions, moral skills as delineated and organized within disciplinary regimes, than the somatic and affective potentialities from which such dispositions draw sustenance" (ibid.).

So instead of a mere vehicle of religious indoctrination, the sermon tapes become the instrument for the creation of certain sensibilities, religious experiences, and a particular sense of selfhood. In great detail Hirschkind analyzes the importance of rhetorical styles of the sermon preachers, the emotions that are expressed by them, and the almost esthetic appreciation that the listeners to these taped sermons attach to them. What this more physical, embodied experience of sermon listening creates is also seen as the necessary substrate to adopt the content of the sermons in a proper manner. The physical attitude and embodied receptiveness of the listener to the sermons is crucial to the grasping of their religious message. This dimension of the sermon tapes is entirely lost, of course, if we simply take the act of listening to them as the passive adoption of a religious message. In a similar way as with regard to the example from Saba Mahmood's book, an entire dimension of the way believers experience themselves and adapt to the world in which they live, partially *through* the acquirement and the disciplining of certain religious sensibilities, thus threatens to escape us. This has considerable consequences for the kind of development initiatives we could envisage with regard to forms of religious revivalism like the da'wa movement, as I will now come to in the concluding part of my paper.

One of the reasons why it is so difficult to grasp this dimension of religious agency, might be that it is so strikingly at odds with the way a secularized life-world perceives the acquisition of religious content. Our own experience, attuned as it is to secluded, meditative surroundings where religious meaning resides in the inner realm of our private consciousness as the final arbiter of all true religious content, could hardly be further away from the busy streets of Cairo, where religious meaning is almost snatched from the transient impressions of urban life. So the alienation we feel with regard to these embodied dimensions of religious experience and agency is itself sustained by a certain, secularized conception of religious experience. [16] Hence it becomes almost inevitable that the surroundings in which the da'wa movement prospered are misunderstood as merely a scene of

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[16] The way these secular sensibilities are themselves the result of a long tradition of adapting to changing historical circumstances within Western Christianity, is most extensively portrayed in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

indoctrination, its faith practices as ephemeral and motivated by misguided ideas. In turn, the development discourse then takes it upon itself to resist the detrimental effects of this presumed scene of indoctrination by engaging with the ideas behind it. My argument here is that this crude and superficial understanding of what is at stake in the dynamics of such religious revival movements is a loss of opportunity for a more profound engagement, which at present falls largely beyond the scope of development practice. There are, of course, considerable practical obstacles to be overcome here, that might make an engagement in this particular case unlikely in the first place. But in a more general sense, as I hope to have indicated in this paper, some of these obstacles might equally reside in our own presumptions about how religious agency works, lodged as they are within the strongly secular and instrumental framework of the development concept itself. And yet I suggest that it would suit the development discourse to take up the challenge that lies hidden within these religious movements, at least for three reasons:

1. We are not talking about some obscure and redundant phenomena here. In many religious traditions, not in the least the Christian denominations, the phenomena we (all too quickly) subsume here under the umbrella of 'religious revival movements', belong to the most vibrant, fastest growing, and in many ways even the most 'modern' appearances of religion today. We should seriously wonder if we can afford to ignore them and merely take sides with what we perceive as the more 'liberal' trends within religious traditions, whose ideas are more appealing to our secularized development standards. Such a stance would at least seriously limit the potential impact of our interventions. It would thus also miss the chance to explore new and other forms of engagement with religious actors that might offer new opportunities for development interactions.

2. It is undeniable that the da'wa movement draws part of its force of resistance from explicitly denying Western secularized concepts and values, which are also part and parcel of the development paradigm. And yet if we try and look beyond the direct terms and expressed ideas of the da'wa movement, we might also perceive a genuine concern about the life-styles that are introduced together with the reigning development agendas of liberalization and consumerist economies.[17] The ethical sensibilities created through the embodied practices of the da'wa movement are, in a sense, a form of physical resistance to these pervasive secular life-styles, and some of their consequences that they clearly perceive as negative. As such, they deserve the attention of development agencies, if we take the concerns of marginalized communities about the detrimental effects of invasive economic and social changes on their lives seriously.

3. This realization should at least give us reason to wonder why an engagement with religious revival movements falls largely beyond our scope. In turn, this should initiate a process of critical self-reflection on how deeply our secular life-styles are embedded in the concepts of development we are promoting. Could a more self-reflexive engagement with the practices like that of the da'wa movement not also offer the opportunity of exploring some of the 'embodied' presumptions in ourselves that make us feel so estranged from these forms of religious practice? In adopting such a critical self-assessment, the development discourse could assume a new role

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[17] It is undeniable that the dominance of secular life-styles comes with what Charles Hirschkind calls "the ever-more pervasive Western cultural forms – movies, television, music, dress styles, and protocols of sociability (…) that insinuate themselves into the senses most directly, shaping the repertoires of affect, gesture and sensibility" (ibid., p. 212).

in dialoguing between cultures and societies, exploring potentials in human experience and development that might otherwise fall beyond the sphere of our secular understanding.

To conclude: in view of these challenges, the 'weak' vilification of religion in development discourse also begins to appear in a different light. It would no longer be a half-hearted attempt to retain a certain pluralistic commitment while confronted with agonizing practical dilemmas, but it itself emerges as the expression of a discomfort that is genuine and the outcome of an as yet diffuse but real ethical dilemma. The tension between the universalizing claims of development, and the aspirations of local actors to shape this development on their own terms and in their own ways, remains one of the major challenges for development discourse today. As Ram Kakarala has put it, the issue might less be, as in the case of human rights, whether these are universal or not, but rather "how human rights could become truly universal in a pluralistic world".[18] Besides the genuine goods of openness, tolerance and respect, this challenge requires a considerable amount of critical self-reflection from the part of development practitioners themselves, in particular, as I hope to have illustrated, when it comes to religious issues.

A final word about this 'weak vilification' then. The word 'weak' here refers to the concept of 'weak thought' of the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo.[19] It is Vattimo's apprehension, that the 'weakening' of being in a philosophical sense is not just a 'post-modern' correction of the ambitions of philosophy, but responds – in a Heideggerian sense – to the movement of being itself. In an allusion to this profound insight, I would like to suggest that the 'weakening' of the claims of development discourse that we experience today, could likewise be seen not as just giving up the more rigorous claims of yesterday, but as responding to the call of a changing world order. It is not merely that we come to realize our own past errors, it is the shifting relations in our globalizing world, including a re-emergence of religious phenomena we counted among these errors, that requires us to respond in a different manner. Seen in this way, affirming the 'weak' vilification of religion in development, as expression of our own discomfort, could very well turn out to be the only proper way to relate to the shifting and unstable ground of our being together in the world today.

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[18] Sitharamam Kakarala: 'Human Rights, Pluralism and Civil Society. Reflecting on Contemporary Challenges in India'. Pluralism Working Paper no. 6 (2010). Published by: Hivos & Kosmopolis Institute. (Quote: page 27).
[19] *'Pensiero debole'*. In: *Il pensiero debole* (Feltrinelli, Milan 1983 (edited by G. Vattimo e P. A. Rovatti)).