

# HANDOUT RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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# 1. Introduction

## The Knowledge Forum for Religion and Development Policy

The Knowledge Forum for Religion & Development Policy seeks to stimulate policy dialogue on the role of religion in combating poverty and exclusion. The Forum is a joint venture of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and nine Dutch NGOs: Cordaid, ICCO, Kerk In Actie, Hivos, IKV Pax Christi, Oikos, Seva, Prisma and CMC Mensen met een Missie.

Religion is currently a prominent item on the nation's political agenda, yet government policymakers and NGO staff often feel out of their depth when they have to deal with it. The Knowledge Forum seeks to bridge this gap by providing analysis, knowledge exchange and practical recommendations. The Forum's secretariat brings together the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the non-governmental organisation BBO (Bureau Beleidsbeïnvloeding en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking). The Forum's members reflect the wide spectrum of beliefs held in Dutch society, and as such, have an equal voice in the policy discussions.

The Forum's members are all committed to upholding international human rights standards and pursuing the eight Millennium Development Goals. The Forum considers conflict resolution and good governance at local and national levels to be essential for reducing poverty, although these factors are not explicitly formulated as part of the MDGs.

This work describes the positive and negative influences of religion in relation to four themes related to the Millennium Development Goals: conflict, education, HIV/AIDS and ecology. It also contains case studies, which show how belief in an invisible world ultimately influences the visible world around us. In the future, the Forum intends to update this work with new themes, analyses and best practices. After all, religious views, motivation, and values will always be part of the civil and political interplay of forces in developing countries. As such, they can provide new insight into the most effective ways to stamp out poverty. For better or for worse, religion is part of human society, and we should be open-minded and respectful of its value and meaning for other people.

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## **Making room for religion in development policy**

Religious faith is a recurrent topic in politics, the media and everyday conversation. Indeed, there is a noticeable resurgence of interest in religion as a phenomenon that rules the daily lives of the vast majority of people in today's world. Religion is a significant factor, whether we consider the rise of the Evangelical movement in Latin America, the expansion of Christianity in China and Africa, or – last but not least – the persistent controversies about the relationship of Islam to Western society.

What is happening at a deeper level? Is religion likely to retain public interest (in the West) or will it fizzle out, like other passing fashions? Could it be that nowadays, religion is being rediscovered as an essential aspect of human life – one that deserves our careful and focused attention? In the contemporary Western world, for various reasons, religion has declined in importance and the influence of faith on daily life is now marginal. Because of this, many Westerners find it hard to realise that in the greater part of the world, by contrast, no such thing has happened. Yet, religion is indeed a widespread phenomenon and no one who reads the newspapers can fail to notice this fact.

Many people are wondering what to think about the 'resurgence of religion', as it has been called. This is certainly the case in the world of development cooperation. Development organisations tend to have religious origins, and a number of them are currently reflecting on how this affects who they are and what they do. Development cooperation, in particular, engages with people for whom religious identity is very significant. However, it is not the remit of development policy to be immediately concerned with the truth content of theological concepts such as an afterlife, God, paradise or spirits. What matters is that most people in developing countries have strong religious convictions, and that development cooperation takes appropriate account of them. Development policy needs mutual understanding, with openness to, and recognition of, other people's religious faith. Development cooperation is not only about eradicating poverty, but also about relating to people who want to be understood and respected.

Since religious faith means so much to people, how can development policy do it justice? On the one hand, organisations could seek cooperation with 'religious resources'. Religious faith can offer insights into sustainability, instil values in education and health care and inspire reconciliation rituals. Development policy can benefit from all of these, and from the influence of faith organisations, leaders and volunteers. By cooperating with religious institutions, development cooperation can extend its influence and increase its opportunities. Religious

convictions may be the key to a proper understanding of a particular local situation. Considering the religious views of others may help development policy to set and articulate its objectives in specific country situations: the effects of development efforts on society as a whole need to be taken into account, including the effects on the social, cultural and religious fabric of society.

However, religion has two sides, both of which need to be acknowledged. Scientific research and experiments in several countries have produced evidence that many religious organisations and leaders have indeed contributed to health care, education, poverty reduction and peacebuilding. But conversely, research also shows that religious rigidity initiates and re-enforces poverty, conflict, inequality and exclusion. Religious traditions can hamper development, for example by excluding women from education and by propagating certain views on sexuality.

It is clear that development cooperation cannot ignore or remain ignorant of religious convictions. Development policy should not only take account of the destructive power of religion. It should also be conscious of the many ways in which development organisations can be more effective by working together with religious institutions. The separation of church and state is not necessarily a barrier in this respect between secular (i.e. state-related) and faith-based organisations. Moreover, religion and development policy often share similar objectives.

The encounter with different cultures – a common phenomenon in our globalised world – shows Western society that religion is not a thing of the past, but indeed very much alive. As this report will show, there are many ways in which development cooperation and religion can actually work together and exchange ideas in hope of a better world. The Knowledge Forum for Religion and Development Policy inquires into the many faces of religion and offers practical tools for building a sustainable development policy

## 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)

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall & Keough (2004)

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.

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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

## 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 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

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<sup>3</sup> Advisory Council on International Affairs (2005)

<sup>4</sup> See Gerrie ter Haar, Soesterberg (2005)

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?
- 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

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<sup>5</sup> Wibren van der Burg

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

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**

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

<sup>8</sup> *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.

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 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

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

<sup>10</sup> Thomas (2005)

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

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<sup>11</sup> See Phillip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (2002) and Frans Wijsen & Robert Schreiter (ed.) (2007)

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.
- 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?*

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

- 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.

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### 3. Religion and Education

*Three case studies for the Knowledge Forum on Religion and Development Cooperation  
(including bibliography)*

#### I. Introduction and formulation of the problem

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and as the key to sustainable development, peace and stability within and between countries. It is considered an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the 21st century, which are being affected by rapid globalisation. Access to basic education, in particular, can enable young men and women to escape from poverty and subjugation.

Nevertheless, in the year 2000, over 113 million children had no access to primary education, 880 million adults remained illiterate, gender discrimination continued to permeate education systems, and the quality of learning and the acquisition of human values and skills fell far short of the aspirations and needs of individuals and societies. Many young people and adults were denied access to the skills and knowledge necessary for gainful employment and full participation in their societies.<sup>13</sup> The international community agreed that unless there is accelerated progress towards education for all, we will fail to achieve the nationally and internationally agreed targets for poverty reduction. As a result, inequality between countries and within societies will deepen even further.

Global consensus on the importance of education is reflected in the Millennium Development Goals. Goal 2 aims to ensure that by 2015, boys and girls everywhere will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. Regarding gender equality and the empowerment of women, Goal 3 emphasises the need to eliminate gender disparity in all levels of education.

In line with these MDGs, the UNESCO-sponsored World Education Forum has committed to the Dakar Framework for Action of 2000. This is a collective commitment to action concerning six Education For All (EFA) objectives.<sup>14</sup> Their added value is that they give equal

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<sup>13</sup> Dakar Framework for Action, 2000

<sup>14</sup> The 6 EFA goals are:

(i) expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;

(ii) ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality;

emphasis to quality and access. Supported by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, both agreements start from the understanding that all children, young people and adults have the human right to benefit from an education that will meet their basic learning needs in the best and fullest sense of the term. This is understood as 'an education that includes learning to know, to do, to live together and to be; an education geared to tapping each individual's talents and potential, and developing learners' personalities, so that they can improve their lives and transform their societies.'<sup>15</sup>

'In the past five years, some progress has been achieved,' as the UN MDG report of 2006 indicates. Net enrolment ratios in primary education have increased to 86% in the developing world, ranging from 95% in Latin America and the Caribbean to 64% in sub-Saharan Africa. The largest numbers of non-attending children live in remote rural areas. High rates of poverty in rural areas, demand for child labour and lack of access to good-quality schooling make this a persistent problem. Another persistent problem is the gender gap in education: worldwide, more than one in five girls of primary school age do not attend school, compared to about one in six boys. Of particular concern is the wide gender gap in sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia, where almost 80% of the world's out-of-school children live.'<sup>16</sup>

Much remains to be done, not only in improving availability and access, but especially in improving the quality and relevance of education. There is a great need for an ongoing collaborative effort by agencies and organisations, both governmental, multilateral and non-governmental.

Historically, churches and other faith-based organisations have always played a crucial role in the provision of basic education. Although, generally, education policymakers do not consider these faith-based organisations as equal partners, the latter often have a long experience in providing high-quality basic education. Local communities often have greater

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(iii) ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes;

(iv) achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults;

(v) eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality;

(vi) improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

<sup>15</sup> Dakar Framework for Action, 2000

<sup>16</sup> The Millennium Development Goals Report, UN, 2006

confidence in them than in government and/or (I)NGOs. This is particularly true of marginalised groups, and regions and situations at risk. Faith-based organisations are increasingly being recognised as discussion partners of governmental authorities in policy development (e.g. in public-private partnerships). They are potential drivers of behaviour change, for instance by actively involving local communities and integrating areas such as health, food security, hygiene and HIV/AIDS prevention. They are not always uncontested as concerns their transfer of religious and other beliefs and values, but no sweeping generalisations should be made here.

To help address the neglect of faith-based education by policymakers, this chapter presents the findings of three case studies about the contribution of religious ideas and organisations to educational development commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prisma and ICCO:

1. *The Role of the Islamic High Council in the Development of Basic Education in Mali* by Cheick Oumar Fomba, for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 2006.
2. *Religion in Vocational Education and Training* by Prisma, September 2006.
3. *Religion as Driver of Change in Ugandan Education* by Wim Westerman and Laurus van Essen, for the ICCO Alliance, March 2007.

Complementary to these case studies, existing literature and research reports have been used to substantiate points made and add critical comments. This study is necessarily limited for practical reasons to the focus countries of Dutch development cooperation, and mainly deals with Christian and Islamic faith-based education. The chapter closes with policy implications.

## **2. Religion and education: main findings of the case studies**

This section discusses the main findings of the case studies under the following headings:

- a. Education ethos
- b. Transfer of values
- c. Focus on vulnerable groups
- d. Faith institutions and faith-based schools
- e. Church-state cooperation

### **a. Education ethos**

The case studies show that faith-based organisations have a holistic educational ethos. UJCC-Uganda states for example: ‘The outcomes of education should be the total formation of each individual.’ ... ‘We don’t want education for its own sake but we wish to promote

education founded on Christian principles, which will mould tomorrow's God-fearing citizens of Uganda.'

Vocational Education and Training (VET) curriculums in schools supported by Prisma not only aim to contribute to the trainees' income generation and self-reliance, but also to 'more holistic objectives, like responsible citizens, dignified life and life skills.' The Mali case study does not explicitly state the ethos guiding the 'madrasahs': Islamic educational institutions which traditionally focus on teaching Islamic theology and religious law but nowadays often include general education. Yet it is noted that 'Mali has a strong cultural potential for support (for basic education) on the basis of its people's Islamic faith'. Many parents prefer their children to attend a Koran school or madrasah rather than a secular state school.' This preference shows that Islamic teachings and values are considered as an indispensable part of education.

This holistic thinking is not limited to the few Christian and Islamic schools of the case-studies, but broadly anchored in various religious traditions. Within Christianity, both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant World Council of Churches hold a broad vision of education. True education, in their view, must strive for the integral forming of the human person, which anticipates the person's final end and at the same time works toward the common good of societies. Children and young people are to be educated and brought up in such a way that they can harmoniously develop their physical, moral and intellectual talents, that they acquire a sense of responsibility and correct use of freedom, and that they be educated for active participation in social life.<sup>17</sup> Much of modern Catholic thinking about education is rooted in the Vatican's *Declaration on Christian Education* of 1965.<sup>18</sup> Protestant churches can draw upon the World Council of Churches' project on Holistic Education (1999-2005). The resulting Holistic Education Resource Book identifies as core elements of Holistic Education: seeking wholeness, a new praxis of knowing, teaching and learning, pedagogy of universal love, community orientation, and affirming spirituality as being the core of life and hence central to education.<sup>19</sup> Education, in brief, is seen as education for transformation.

Similar views are put forward by Islamic thinkers. 'Islamic education is concerned not only with the instruction and training of the mind and the transmission of knowledge (*ta`lim*) but also with the education of the whole being of men and women (*tarbiyah*). The teacher is

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<sup>17</sup> Brian Kelly: *A Vision for Catholic Education in the Twenty-first Century*. Australian Catholic University.

<sup>18</sup> Declaration on Christian Education, Sacred Ecumenical Council, Vatican, 1965

<sup>19</sup> Peter Schreiner, *Holistic Education as a Challenge for Modern Education*. WCC, EEF-NET 18/19, November 2006.

therefore not only a *muallim*, a 'transmitter of knowledge' but also a *murabbi*, a 'trainer of souls and personalities'. 'The Islamic educational system never divorced the training of the mind from that of the soul.' Islamic education ideally aims to provide a context for the total and balanced development of every student in every sphere of learning – spiritual, moral, imaginative, intellectual, cultural, aesthetic, emotional and physical – directing all these aspects towards the attainment of a conscious relationship with God, the ultimate purpose of man's life on earth.<sup>20</sup>

In both the Islamic and the Christian religious tradition, lively debates are ongoing about how to constantly adjust and improve educational practice in the direction of explicitly stated ideals.<sup>21</sup> Common to all these debates is a critical assessment of the commercialisation and utilitarianism of current educational systems in the Western world and in other countries which have adopted them. Education is seen as being geared to economic performance, competition and efficiency above all else. By emphasising the holistic nature of education, faith-based groups constantly remind us that human development is total development, including the moral, spiritual and emotional domains as much as the intellectual and physical.

Another critical argument often mentioned by orthodox religious groups is that modernisation equals Westernisation, and should therefore be rejected. Faith-based education of this kind, whether Christian, Islamic or otherwise, gives considerable emphasis to tradition and morality, thereby often reinforcing traditional gender relations. This view is expressed in an extreme form by religious educational institutions that promote anti-Western views and attitudes and propagate the superiority of their own belief. Violence against non-believers is considered to be sometimes justifiable. In the context of the Bush administration's 'war on terror', these practices fuel heated debates on how to control extremist madrasahs such as those found in Pakistan and other countries with significant Muslim populations.<sup>22</sup>

## **b. Transfer of values**

The case studies show that transfer of values is a key feature of education provided by faith-based schools. The Uganda case study states that 'Christian values that should be promoted in schools are discipline, respect, decency, stewardship, a sense of the divine, tolerance, and

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<sup>20</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, quoted by Jeremy Hanzell-Thomas in *Excellence in Islamic Education: Key Issues for the Present Time*, Bath, UK, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> An interesting review of the current education debate within Islam can be found in *A Vision of Effective Islamic Education* by Dawud Tauhidi; Islamic-World.net.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Mukhtar Alam, *Madrasahs and Terrorism: Myth or Reality?* 2004; and reports by the International Crisis Group on Pakistan Madrasahs and Violent Extremism, 2007.

faithfulness in marriage. Besides practical vocational training, the VET curriculums devote considerable attention to ethics, character training, values and norms such as honesty, integrity, responsibility, discipline, dedication, punctuality, trustworthiness, sincerity, diligence and being cooperative. In the Mali case study, reference is made to the contribution of Islamic education to national peace and harmony; moral training and character building also receive considerable attention.

The case studies reveal a variety of means through which the transfer of values occurs:

- ethical elements in the curriculum, formal or informal courses or sessions on (work and business) ethics and/or life skills, extramural activities;
- religious education: knowledge about one's own religion; sacred books and their relevance for daily life; sometimes knowledge about other religions;
- religious rituals: weekly or daily prayers, celebration of religious festivals;
- lifestyle: selection of teachers on the basis of faith commitment or affinity; teachers are seen as role models who embody the desired values and norms;
- the school chaplain: this person organises activities to cater for the spiritual needs of students, and their appointment is church-funded.

None of the case studies mentions negative experiences in terms of the immediate social environment's response to the transfer of faith-based values. At the Christian schools featured, the faith of non-Christian students is respected. They are free to attend religious education or not to do so. The parents' written consent is required in advance. The Christian schools respect non-Christians' freedom of choice in the matter of religious education.

Among madrasahs, a distinction should be made between traditional and modern institutions. Traditional madrasahs are seen as centres for religious instruction and therefore attract only Muslim students. Modern madrasahs, frequently founded by Islamic NGOs, combine religious education with a general curriculum and are often open to non-Muslim children as well (see below, point c.)

When it comes to values transfer, there are critical issues relating to intolerance, proselytism and discrimination against women. These tend to be characteristic of orthodox or zealous religious groups that adhere to a literal interpretation of sacred texts. These exist in all religions and include Christian Evangelicals as well as orthodox Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist groups. Suggested ways for dealing with these issues are:

- Not to reject these practices right away, but try to understand and dialogue about the underlying vision of human wholeness and fears of loss of traditional values. Some of these

organisations feel the need to defend their values against the perceived threat of modernisation. Others zealously wish to save souls in order to achieve a new social order. All of them, in one way or another are a response to modernisation processes. Their fears and values should be acknowledged (not necessarily agreed with) as a first step to creating an opening for further discussion about how to prepare children effectively for participation in a rapidly changing society.

- Avoid the pitfall of cultural relativism, meaning that all cultures and religions have their own values that should be respected. While cultural-religious diversity is a great good, discriminatory practices or harmful hate messages should not be tolerated. Such practices need to be confronted, preferably by forces from within the society/religion concerned, with global standards of human dignity and rights.<sup>23</sup>

- As concerns gender sensitivity, it is important to identify and assess which explicit or implicit messages faith-based schools transfer about gender roles and responsibilities. The key question here is whether the education contributes to the freedom of choice and empowerment of girls (and boys), and if it does so in a culturally appropriate way. Sewing lessons for girls, for example, may look rather old-fashioned to Westerners, but they have proven to be empowering since they give the girls access to skills and a potential source of income in a culturally acceptable fashion.

### **c. Focus on vulnerable groups**

Another striking characteristic of faith-based education is the focus on vulnerable or marginal groups. The Uganda and VET case studies mention this explicitly as an expression of Christian love for one's neighbour. In Uganda this is manifested by special forms of education for the disabled (deaf schools), for girls (girls' schools) and for pastoralists (mobile schools). In the same spirit of service to the least privileged, the regular Christian schools have also replaced their past elite orientation by broadly accessible education for all.

In a comparable spirit of service, the Malian Koran schools and madrasahs attract mostly children from poor rural families. In various Islamic countries, Islamic NGOs take up the challenge to offer basic education to the rural and urban poor by starting nursery, primary and high schools in urban poor neighbourhoods and rural areas. These madrasah schools combine teaching of the core values and beliefs of Islam with secular learning (numeracy and literacy) in a child-centred way. In this way, they aim to equip young people effectively for their role in a rapidly changing society. An interesting example of this trend is visible in

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<sup>23</sup> See Bas de Gaay Fortmann in *Human Rights and Religious Pluralism*, 2007, for a state-of-the-art contribution to the debate on universal human rights versus religious pluralism.

East Africa, where the Aga Khan Foundation (which receives funding from various sources, including the Canadian government) has established numerous schools, supported by the Institute for Educational Development in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.<sup>24</sup> Many of these schools attract not only Muslim children, but Christian and Hindu children as well.

In a more general sense, various reports<sup>25</sup> show that parents in many development countries prefer faith-based schools to governmental schools because of :

- congruence in religious values;
- broad accessibility and rootedness in society, open to the poorest and most vulnerable;
- trustworthiness and integrity;
- quality of education.

Considering the fact that many government schools in developing countries struggle with problems of corruption, poorly paid and motivated staff, and negligence of remote rural areas, this raises the issue of long-term policies to improve the overall educational system (see below).

#### **d. Faith institutions and faith-based schools**

In many developing countries, faith institutions have a long history of providing social services, including education, as an expression of their core beliefs about holistic human wellbeing. Where faith-based schools belong to faith institutions, however, one should be aware that power relations also play a significant role. The question is whether and how religious politics affect educational policy and practice at these schools. One way in which this can happen is through funding. In all major religions, radical groups exist that use funding of faith-based schools as a strategy to promote their radical agenda, whether right-wing Christian Evangelicals in the USA, ultra-orthodox Jewish groups in Israel, Gulf State political Islamists or ultra-nationalist Hindutva groups in India.

Another way is through institutional dependency of schools on the religious institution to which they belong. The case studies on Uganda and VET curriculums make a relevant distinction between policy level and operational level. At the policy level, the influence of churches is clearly reflected, for instance in the appointment of church members to the school boards. In this particular instance, however, the practice has not led to any problems. At the operational level, the case studies reveal that the high professional level of the school

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<sup>24</sup> Don Cayo, *Teaching in Africa: Kenya*. Vancouver Sun, April 8, 2006

<sup>25</sup> Ton Dietz, *Participatory Evaluation of Development Interventions in a Vulnerable Environment (West Pokot, Kenya)*, 2006.

organisations proves to be an effective barrier against eventual power claims of local churches. Lines of influence are informal and run as much from school to church as vice versa.

In majority Sunni Islam, the situation is different because there are no comparable religious authorities. Madrasahs can operate relatively autonomously. This autonomy may be threatened, however, by dependency on foreign funds, as is demonstrated by current controversies over the radicalisation of madrasahs in Asia and Africa as a result of foreign funding. In response, governments try to make new laws that require madrasahs to be accountable for their funding sources. As has been previously mentioned, similar funding strategies are being followed by radical groups within other religions.

#### **e. Church-state cooperation in education**

Different arrangements exist in practice, depending on whether the religion has a majority or minority position. In a majority situation, a special religious institution is often responsible for contacts with government. In the case of Mali this is the Islamic High Council of Mali (HCIM). In Uganda it is the Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC). With regard to these institutions, the following factors require assessment:

- representation: Does the institution represent various religious denominations (Council of Churches) or one single denomination? And to what extent does the institution represent grassroots religious organisations?
- professionalism: Does the institution have specialised staff with expertise in education?

The Uganda case study shows that the broad Council of Churches (UJCC) with specialised education staff can be potentially regarded as a serious player in the field of education. It addresses the following issues:

- \* ensuring a coordinated involvement of churches in policy advocacy and other issues relevant to the provision of quality education, including education for girls;
- \* advocacy for a clear institutionalised mechanism for collaboration between government and churches as foundation bodies in the management of educational institutions, policy formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- \* exploring ways of raising resources to support churches in their ministry to vulnerable groups and development of relevant materials in support of the curriculum.

Church-state cooperation in education in Uganda is embedded in a Memorandum of Understanding. The state fixes the core curriculum and monitors the quality; the churches are implementers, administer schools (they often own schools and land) and acquire funds.

This model can be found in (or could be applicable to) other countries with a majority religion that is active in education.

In various Islamic countries, governments have proposed new laws and institutional arrangements in an attempt to get more control over madrasah education. A case in point is India's madrasah modernisation scheme. This has received strong opposition from traditionalist *ulamas* as they see this as interfering with their functioning and curtailing their autonomy. Some even fear ulterior motives, namely the destruction of Muslim faith and identity. While more liberal Muslims see the need for modernising madrasah education (through new subjects like mathematics, science and English, better teacher-training, etc.) to avoid further marginalisation of young Muslims, strong opposition from traditionalist and fundamentalist *ulamas* make this a long and arduous road.<sup>26</sup>

In a minority situation, the situation is more complex. The state sometimes opposes religious minority schools out of fear of proselytism or social tension. Formal representative platforms or institutional arrangements are often lacking, which puts the minority schools in a vulnerable position. For this reason, the Christian minority schools in the VET case study are very cautious about displaying their religious identity. Considering the government's overall responsibility for basic education and for managing (potential) social tensions, appropriate institutional mechanisms for dealing with schools of religious minority groups should be advocated here as well.

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<sup>26</sup> Sources: Fahimuddin, *Modernisation of Muslim Education in India*, New Delhi, 2004; M. Akhtar Siddiqui, *Empowerment of Muslims Through Education*, New Delhi, 2004; Yoginder Sikand, *The State and Madrasah Reform: An Indian Deobandi Perspective*, 2007. For Indonesia, see Martin van Bruinessen in *On the Edge of Many Worlds*, 2006 and *Zem Zem (Arabisering van de Indonesische islam?)*, 2006.

## Policy implications

### 1. Educational ethos.

It is important to be acquainted with the educational ethos of faith-based schools, their underlying values and the practical application of these values in education. Besides implementing a government-prescribed core curriculum, faith-based schools have their own normative ideas and ethics that influence their way of teaching. Often, these are much appreciated by parents and communities due to congruent values and beliefs.

More orthodox religious groups in all religions tend to be more forceful in the transmission of their values and norms than liberal religious groups. From a developmental point of view, the important criteria to be assessed here are intellectual freedom and the empowerment of girls.

### 2. Context:

It is important to discern different contexts in which faith-based schools operate:

(1) *Minority situation*: the religion is a small minority in a diffuse religious context or co-exists alongside a majority religion;

(2) *Diffuse situation*: the religion is one of several major religions;

(3) *Majority situation*: the religion is the majority religion.

Each of these situations influences how partners perceive themselves in relation to their context and the way their religious identity is expressed in their educational curriculums. All the case studies show that institutional arrangements involving government and faith-based schools are possible and desirable – although this is admittedly easier to achieve in a majority situation. Trust-building and transparency about one's motives for engaging (e.g. quality improvement) are vital for creating a favourable climate for cooperation.

### 3. Transfer of values:

In a theoretical sense, faith-based schools operate at three different levels:

(1) *reflected level*: official statements, reports, policy documents;

(2) *spoken level*: informal ideas such as found in newspapers, magazines, textbooks;

(3) *experienced level*: what is going on in everyday life: actual lessons, informal conversations, hidden curriculum, etc.

Practically, it may not always be possible to identify what happens at each of the three levels. From a developmental perspective, it is vital to collect basic information on:

- Accessibility of education for students from a range of religious backgrounds.
- Tolerance and respect for various religious beliefs, including optional attendance at religious instruction, and no proselytism.
- Gender sensitivity: explicit and implicit messages about gender roles and responsibilities. Contribution to empowerment, emancipation, and freedom of choice for girls.

4. Long-term educational strategy

Support of faith-based education should be embedded in a long-term strategy for strengthening the whole educational sector (state and non-state) in specific countries. Depending on the context, different approaches may be needed here. In countries where the state is weak and/or corrupt, it would be valid to make use of existing faith-based schools, since they often have the only functioning infrastructure. In countries where the state is relatively stable, state education can be supported in conjunction with a policy of respect and support towards non-state education that meets the criteria of quality, accessibility, tolerance and gender sensitivity. Where there is an acceptable state education system, faith-based schools could be assisted to change their position within the education sector from service delivery to a more advocacy/lobby oriented organisation.

5. Impact of funding on intra-religious dynamics

It is important to analyse the formal and informal organisational structures and power relationships within the religion concerned. How are faith-based schools related to these structures and mechanisms? And what is the possible impact of external funding on the curriculum content and on the internal dynamics within the religion concerned (e.g. well-funded schools versus poor churches)? An assessment of internal structures and relations will give insight into the power dynamics and internal checks and balances for the spending and accounting of funds.

6. Church-state cooperation

Depending on whether the context is majority or minority, different church-state arrangements concerning education are possible. Where Christianity is a majority religion, a special religious institution is often responsible for contacts with government. This offers a platform to negotiate a framework for cooperation which identifies, among other things, the core curriculum and quality standards to be met by each school. Where Islam is a majority religion, central faith-based education institutions do not always exist. Different strategies are called for here, such as

affiliation of madrasahs to state boards or government-recognised madrasah education boards or councils (outside direct state control). State assistance to faith-based education, if given at all, could be financial (providing teachers' salaries), or in kind (in the form of books, teaching equipment, etc.).

## 4. Religion and HIV/AIDS: the defining issue of our time

*Three case studies: findings and bibliography for the Knowledge Forum on Religion and Development Policy.*

“Spirituality and religion are part and parcel of the culture of Zimbabwe. It is therefore expected that help also addresses the spiritual needs of people. Offering help is not only offering practical help, but it is also meeting spiritual needs. Christian organisations have this ‘holistic approach’ due to their Christian character and belief, which includes the spiritual needs of people. Due to this drive, there is no place for a technical ‘hit and run’ approach.”

Darija Kupers: *Religion as a driver of change: case study of two Christian HIV/AIDS organisations in Zimbabwe* (Prisma)

### 1. Introduction

Twenty-five years into the epidemic, AIDS has become one of the defining issues of our time: a truly global problem. AIDS affects every region and every country of the world, challenging health systems and undermining our capacity to reduce poverty, promote development and maintain national security. Since 1981, some 65 million people have been infected with HIV and 25 million have died of AIDS-related illnesses.

#### ***Global facts and figures:***

- A total of 39.5 million people were living with HIV in 2006 (2.6 million more than in 2004). The number of new infections in 2006 rose to 4.3 million in 2006 (400,000 more than in 2004).

- Sub-Saharan Africa remains the worst-affected region in the world. Two thirds of all people living with HIV live in this region – 24.7 million people in 2006. Almost three quarters of all adult and child deaths due to AIDS occurred in sub-Saharan Africa –
- 2.1 million of the global 2.9 million deaths due to AIDS.
- The number of people living with HIV increased in every region in the world over the past two years.
- The most striking increases have occurred in east Asia and in Eastern Europe and central Asia, where the number of people living with HIV in 2006 was over one fifth (21%) higher than in 2004.
- Globally and in every region, more adult women (15 years and over) than ever before are now living with HIV. The 17.7 million women living with HIV in 2006 represent an increase of over one million as compared with 2004.
- Access to treatment and care has greatly increased in recent years. Through the expanded provision of antiretrovirals, an estimated two million life years have been gained since 2002 in low and middle-income countries.
- The centrality of high-risk behaviours (such as injecting drug use, unprotected paid sex and unprotected sex between men) is evident in the HIV epidemics of Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America.
- Although the epidemics also extend into the general populations across the world, they remain highly concentrated around specific population groups.

Source: UNAIDS, December 2006

Churches, mosques and faith-based organisations play a potentially valuable role in the international AIDS response. Unfortunately, policymaking organisations, international donors and other stakeholders often lack sufficient knowledge and understanding of religious dynamics and the role of religious institutions and therefore often look at this role in a simplistic and reductionist manner. In this chapter, an effort is made to improve mutual recognition between churches and faith-based organisations on the one hand and policymaking organisations, international donors and a larger number of actors on the other.

We present the findings of three case studies about the contribution of religion and religious organisations to the international AIDS response. We also draw on existing research reports and literature. This article mainly addresses aspects of traditional, Christian and Islamic faith-based perspectives, regarding their response to AIDS in an African context. This, of course, limits the perspective in both geographical and religious terms. However, it does mean that the outlines presented are likely to be broader in application.

## **2. HIV prevention: a three-layer framework**

The factors fanning the HIV pandemic and making individuals and communities vulnerable to infection with this virus are many and complex. HIV prevention strategies, if they are to be effective in the immediate as well as the long term, need to take account of this complexity and to mobilise multi-faceted responses involving all sectors of society.

UNAIDS identifies five contextual domains that are virtually universal in communications about HIV preventive behaviour: government policy, socioeconomic status, culture, gender relations and spirituality. In practice however, prevention strategies have, from the outset, tended to be reduced to 'magic bullet' initiatives seeming to offer instant solutions. Such approaches place their protagonists in 'pro-condom' or 'abstinence/fidelity only' groups, which become diametrically opposed and mutually antagonistic. Discussions, strategies and prevention programmes become polarised and confrontational. They also reduce an understanding of prevention to being wholly concerned with sexual transmission of the virus and with promoting free choices by autonomous, empowered individuals. The complex range of issues driving the pandemic is lost from sight as proponents of these 'one-liner', over-simplistic solutions hold sway. The solutions proposed from either end of this polarised or reductionist approach could themselves become hijacked by covert political, religious or cultural agendas and fuelled by mutual distrust and prejudice.

The understanding of HIV prevention proposed in this paper is based on the analysis and work of Cafod, Trocaire and Veritas. In particular, the work of Ann Smith and Enda McDonagh has been important for the development of an internationally respected perspective on HIV/AIDS. It has strongly influenced the perspective on HIV/AIDS of UNAIDS and WCC and is reflected in the work and writing of progressive Islamic organisations.

An effective response to HIV/AIDS requires a combination of initiatives within three different areas:

- **Reducing vulnerability:** decreasing the personal factors such as unemployment, personal poverty, substance abuse, stigma, peer/social pressure etc. that increase an individual's vulnerability to infection. At a still deeper level, the society-wide factors that increase this vulnerability such as political, legal, cultural and religious factors as well as gender inequality, poverty (local, north-south), international trade and finance.
- **Reducing risk:** reducing the immediate risk of infection through bodily fluids or person-to-person contact (sex partners, mother-to-child).
- **Mitigating impact:** mitigating the effects on individuals, such as illness, death, stigma, increased poverty, increased gender inequality, increased number of orphans and vulnerable children, as well as the wider social and economic effects on services, infrastructures and general development in countries worst affected by the pandemic.

HIV prevention must be concerned with mitigating the impact, reducing the risks and decreasing the vulnerability factors that place people at risk. An understanding of prevention that excludes any of these layers is incomplete and will be of limited effectiveness, even in the immediate term.

#### ***a) Reducing vulnerability***

Risk reduction strategies alone will not be sufficient to prevent HIV effectively, because an individual's personal strategies are conditioned by their social context. Hence the need to incorporate this third layer within a fuller understanding of HIV prevention. This third layer describes personal and societal factors that influence, and even dictate, the behaviours of individuals and communities. A key feature common to all of these factors is that they arise from, and generate imbalances of, power between men and women (i.e. gender relations), individuals, communities and countries. Such imbalances significantly curtail the behaviour choices of those who are disempowered, making them more vulnerable to HIV.

Thus, an overall HIV prevention strategy must also include initiatives that redress these imbalances of power that exist at personal or societal levels. To date, even where the influence of these factors is recognised, HIV prevention strategies have still too often been interpreted as being solely concerned with immediate risk reduction. These deeper causative factors are consigned to separate response strategies by governments, international agencies and local civil society groupings alike. The result is a disjointed 'parallel track' approach, which fails to make the connection in practical terms between HIV risks and the vulnerability factors augmenting those risks. Any initiative that seeks to address one or other of these vulnerability factors is and must be recognised as an essential component of a wider HIV prevention strategy. These factors are irrevocably intermeshed and interconnected, indicating once again the need for complementary and concerted responses.

### ***b) Reducing the Risk***

Risk reduction initiatives seek to provide individuals and communities with an accurate and full understanding of the risks of HIV infection to themselves and others. They also enable individuals to acquire the skills and resources to implement changes in their personal or professional lives in order to minimise these risks. Such initiatives are concerned with enabling individuals to adopt measures that afford them immediate protection, be it partial or complete.

Typical risk reduction strategies are listed in Box 1. In practice, the term 'HIV prevention' is most often used to refer to one or a number of these risk reduction strategies. This reductionist use of the term should be avoided, both because it denies the breadth and complexity of response that is needed if HIV prevention is to be effective, and because it far too readily leads to obstructive and destructive polarisation.

The listing in figure 1 might misleadingly suggest that risk reduction is about choosing one or other option, more or less at random or in rigid adherence to the dictates of social, cultural or religious pressures. This framework proposes a different interpretation. It requires us instead to think of a risk reduction continuum running from high-risk activities in an individual's personal or professional life, to those carrying low or even no risk of HIV infection.

Developing an appropriate risk reduction strategy becomes a process whereby individuals identify their actual levels of risk and decide what changes are possible or desirable (given their circumstances) which will reduce the level of risk.

### **Prevention of HIV: 1. Reducing the Risk**

Involves strategies concerned with immediate protection:

- Abstinence
- Delay of first sexual encounter
- Mutually faithful monogamous long-term relationships
- Reduction in number of sexual partners
- Reduction in instances of casual sex
- Condom use
- Non-penetrative sex
- Harm reduction with drug injection
- Safer blood transfusions
- Universal precautions by health workers/carers
- Prevention of mother-to-child transmission
- Voluntary counselling and testing
- Prompt treatment for STDs
- Prevention of forced sex

Box 1: Typical Risk Reduction Strategies

Any strategy that enables a person to move from a higher risk activity towards the lower end of the risk reduction continuum is a valid risk reduction strategy. With appropriate support, the individual is enabled to establish the goal they can realistically aim at or opt for. They are also helped to identify what level of risk this still carries for them and perhaps how they might work at minimising this further, over time.

#### ***c) Mitigating the impact***

In making this an essential component of the framework, the inextricable link between prevention and care, support and treatment should be stressed. Any care, treatment, psychosocial support or livelihood initiatives that improve the physical health and economic and emotional well-being of people infected and affected by HIV must be seen as valid and valuable prevention efforts. Such initiatives enable people living with HIV to contribute to the stability and further development of families and wider communities, thereby preventing the decline into poverty and stigmatisation that so often fan the pandemic.

In conclusion: the combination of the three layers creates a prevention cycle. Decreasing the vulnerability reduces risk, which mitigates impact, which in turn decreases vulnerability. A single institution, organisation or project will not normally address all the aspects of this cycle.

The challenge is for each actor to identify their part in the cycle and to know who else is contributing to it. In this way, the role and limitations of each actor can be clearly defined and respected, and different actors can work together in complementary, multi-sectoral initiatives contributing to a single HIV-prevention programme.

### **3. The role of churches and faith-based organisations in the international AIDS response**

A number of international donors and policymaking organisations have acknowledged the valuable role, potential and actual, that faith-based organisations play, or could play, in the international AIDS response. This is particularly relevant in relation to the broad prevention perspective described above. Donors and policymaking organisations are often active in areas of economic and social justice at local national and international level, and are therefore engaged in tackling power imbalances. They are among the most important providers of care, treatment, psychosocial support or livelihood initiatives that improve the physical health and economic and emotional well-being of those living with infection. They also provide individuals and communities with an understanding of the risks of HIV infection to themselves and others and give clear messages on risk reduction – although these do not always provide accurate and complete information.

Moreover, churches and faith-based organisations have a long-term presence in regions and situations at risk (to a greater degree than other actors), focusing on the most marginalised in society and holding the trust of the local communities. Finally, churches and faith-based organisations also have the ability to influence the attitudes and behaviours of their community members by building on these relationships of trust and respect. It is true that they are not always uncontested as concerns their transfer of religious beliefs and values, but no sweeping generalisations should be made here.

On the other hand, policymaking organisations, international donors and other actors often fail to recognise the broad role that churches and faith-based organisations play in the international AIDS response. They look at the role of churches and other faith-based organisations from the reductionist prevention perspective, resulting in polarisation: ‘pro-condom’ or ‘abstinence/fidelity only’, placing their protagonists in groups which become diametrically opposed and mutually antagonistic.

It must also be said of churches and other faith-based organisations that they themselves often view their own role in the AIDS response in the same reductionist way. Moreover, on HIV/AIDS related attributes, they continue to score rather low. The following are typical:

- Lack of policy to deal with HIV/AIDS within the church;
- Comparatively low mainstreaming of HIV/AIDS within the church's theology;
- Great difficulty in addressing issues of sexuality and patriarchy by and in the church;
- Churches often underestimate the role and position of women with regard to HIV/AIDS. Women are worst affected, yet this fact is insufficiently recognised by churches and faith-based organisations;
- Great difficulty addressing the imbalance in power relations between men and women;
- Lack of networking and collaboration;
- Although things are gradually changing for the better, stigma and discrimination are at times rife and the language used in dealing with the pandemic can in itself be stigmatising;
- The focus is still too often on individual sins instead of the structural sin (injustice) of the society/community;
- Young people are the most vulnerable yet at the same time, there has been an exodus of young people from the church because of the beliefs and the values held at church leadership level;
- Lack of advocacy and activism.

(Source: *The Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative in Africa*)

### **AIDS-competent churches**

However, over the last five to six years the various churches and faith-based organisations have been working hard on their 'theology in times of AIDS'. The most perceptible outcome of these theology-oriented activities is a growing understanding among academic theologians and church leaders of the relationship between scriptural messages about compassion, forgiveness and acceptance, and the presence and impact of HIV/AIDS in church communities. For example, this understanding is affecting the way church leaders and their congregations perceive and care for community members who are infected or affected by HIV and AIDS. It is also impacting the way that people living with HIV/AIDS view themselves as accepted and supported by the community. Furthermore, church leaders themselves are beginning to focus on themselves as powerful role models in fighting stigma, discrimination and denial.

Many Christians living with AIDS have found support and comfort in Bible-study groups which focus on the life of Jesus Christ as someone who stood up for the marginalised and stigmatised. Those groups often confront traditional church leaders with texts from the Bible (Luke 3: 16-22; Mark 1; John 8; 1 Peter 4) and demand a 'living' church that is AIDS-competent and demonstrates commitment, support and care for people living with AIDS.

#### ***Characteristics of AIDS-competent churches***

- Teaching and practice indicate that stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS is sinful and against the will of God.
- Leaders and members of the community understand the severity of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa and have basic information about transmission and prevention.
- Leaders and members of the community reach out with collaborative efforts in the field of HIV/AIDS.
- Leaders have identified with and assumed their role in prevention of HIV transmission, taking into consideration pastoral, cultural and gender issues.
- Church resources and structures are used to provide care, counselling and support.

Box 2. Source: *The Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative in Africa*

#### **Islam**

In Muslim societies, an increasing number of religious leaders have started to acknowledge the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. According to Jaap Breetvelt, formerly on the staff of Kerk in Actie, Islamic texts are flexible and can be adapted for all times and contexts. In his view, the way in which the Gospels tend to be interpreted and misinterpreted by preachers (especially men) working from various translations of the Bible has a parallel in Islam. The Koran and Hadith texts and the practices based on customs and traditions are often misinterpreted as being grounded in Islam.

Breetvelt furthermore states that in the literature, most authors indicate that Islam gives women absolute right to contraception. Islam gives women the right to sexual health by discouraging practices that were believed to be harmful, such as anal intercourse and sex during menstruation. Islam also gives women the right to proper sex education and the right to enjoy sex. However, these rights are exclusively to be exercised within marital relations.

Breetvelt also quotes the work of the Islamic Medical Association of Uganda, which has looked at important issues in the struggle against HIV/AIDS from an Islamic perspective:

- *Abstinence*: a number of Koranic texts and Ahadith state that 'Allah has prepared forgiveness and great reward to men and women who guard their chastity'.
- *Being faithful*: adultery is condemned as a great sin; an adulterer is not considered a believer at the time of having illicit sexual intercourse.
- *Care and support*: Great emphasis is put on the duty of believers to 'help one another in righteousness and piety, to save a life, to spend in charity to the orphans and the poor, to those suffering hardship'.
- *Treatment*: The Muslim believer is told that Allah has created disease and also the cure, and is called to seek treatment whenever he/she is sick, because Allah did not create any illness without also providing specific treatment for it.
- *Stigma and discrimination*: Suspicion is sinful and should therefore be avoided. In their love and sympathy for one another, believers are like one body: when one part is affected with pain, the whole body responds through wakefulness and fever.
- *Counselling*: It is the duty of those who possess knowledge to impart it to their neighbours through good counsel, to join what is lawful and forbid what is prohibited. This is the will of Allah. Equally, it is the duty of the ignorant to acquire knowledge from their more learned neighbours. Allah truly forgives all sin.
- *Morals*: Muslim leaders to whom Allah has given power are called to remain constant in prayer and to be charitable givers.
- *Young people to practise abstinence*: Young people are to choose the right companions, to listen to the advice of their parents and elders, to have good morals and be decently dressed. Females and males should be separated.

For a good example of a modern Islamic way of addressing the issues which are at stake with regard to sexual and reproductive health, Breetvelt quotes Dr Ahmed Ragab, Associate Professor of Reproductive Health at the International Islamic Centre for Population Studies and Research at Al Azhar University, Cairo. According to Ragab, certain Islamic sacred and theological texts are compatible with more egalitarian notions on reproductive and sexual health. The key issues are choice, dignity, and being free of the risk of disease and its side effects.

Contextual Muslim theology in Africa, as found in publications by the South African organisation Positive Muslims, has produced an equally broad analysis of the AIDS pandemic, as indicated in the introduction to this chapter. 'If we are serious about rising as

witness-bearers for Allah in the matter of Justice, then we must also address the real causes of the AIDS suffering as well as the way our behaviour strengthens unjust systems.’

### **Religion and culture**

In large parts of the developing world, unlike the more secularised western world, religion or spirituality is very much part of daily life. Religion and culture are carriers of values and beliefs that strongly determine individual behaviour. This section elaborates on some examples of the difficulties, dilemmas and potential of religion and the values it promotes to bring about sustainable behavioural change. This section draws heavily on studies by Jaap Breetvelt, who is engaged in major research on the involvement of African churches in the international AIDS response. In his studies on Islam and HIV/AIDS, Breetvelt did not find discussions similar to those taking place in the African Christian World about the African ‘map of the universe’ (ancestors, vital forces, notions about masculinity, etc.) versus European interpretations of Christianity.

The case studies and bibliography show that it is vital to understand what it means for Africans to live in a society that is based on a traditional worldview as well as on concepts and values that were imported into Africa by Arab traders, colonising Europeans and Christian missionaries. Recognising and acknowledging these different value systems is essential for the development of effective and sustainable approaches to promote behavioural change.

According to Breetvelt, ‘The overall issue of the relationship between the African ‘map of the universe’ and Western Christianity is dealt with by all writers, but in different ways. We can safely assume that there exist contradictions and differences between the two value systems, particularly with regard to the vital forces, more in general on human sexuality, that are as such relevant for our discussion about church, religion and HIV/AIDS’.

### *Masculinity*

Traditional notions about male sexuality and gender relations determine sexual behaviour to a great degree. These have to do with the concepts of vital force and fear of impotence, fertility, the cycle of birth, life and death, and becoming an ancestor. Many Africans see the body as a system of tubes; flow indicates that the body is functioning well, a blockage of tubes means disorder/disease and might badly influence other tubes. The hypothesis is that the use of a condom is perceived as blocking a tube (the penis with the ejaculation of vital fluids) and makes men impotent. Breetvelt quotes the African philosopher Kä Mana as saying: “...the message of A (abstinence), B (be faithful) and C (use condoms) in HIV/AIDS

prevention cannot lead to behavioural change when the traditional African concepts of masculinity are taken into account. Faithfulness is seen as diminishing his power (vital force), abstinence as an attack on his virility, and using a condom is like taking away his masculinity.'

### *Gender*

The theologian Madipoane Maseya states in her paper that Christian African women are 'trapped between two canons.' The African culture has its own definitions of womanhood and manhood, coupled with expectations of the relationships between women and men. It is a patriarchal culture in which the husband determines the woman's identity – he is the owner of her body. According to Maseya, the Bible still enjoys authoritative status in the life of many women. However, this Bible has been interpreted for African women by male preachers and teachers, or women have been socialised to male interpretation of the Bible. Thus, Christian African women have become vulnerable to HIV/AIDS due to both African culture and Christian preaching.

### *Becoming an ancestor*

Like concepts of masculinity and gender, aspiring to become an ancestor is equally threatened by the pandemic. Breetvelt: 'In some societies, like the Akan of Ghana, the man who in life was morally bankrupt is disqualified from being an ancestor. So is the one who dies tragically or through some loathsome disease like leprosy or madness. To this, we might add the modern pandemic of HIV/AIDS.'

### *Sin and evil*

Values also differ with regard to the image of God and notions of 'sin'. HIV/AIDS Christian theologies emphasise that God is love and Christ is the compassionate healer. For many African Christians, these notions are not compatible with their deep conviction that God is a distant God and that in the case of disease for which no cure is available, other powers are at work. This leaves room for all sorts of extreme healing practices. In the HIV/AIDS theologies, personal sin as the cause (or non-cause) of HIV/AIDS and liberation from sin have been mentioned as important issues for theological reflection. It should be asked to what extent these notions of sin and evil are relevant for people who see evil is a malevolent force that is located externally in powers and spirits, and in sorcerers and witches evil in the individual is more likely to be seen as ritual pollution or social offence. These views result in suspicion of strangers, a fatalistic blaming of one's troubles on others, and a feeling of social shame. And finally they can lead to fatalistic behaviour, particularly in the era of HIV/AIDS.

These few examples illustrate the likely influence of different religious and cultural value systems on the behaviour of people. 'If people have values, they don't fluctuate like money. Values are very important, and once understood, very hard to let go of', as was stated in one of the case studies. Effecting a sustainable behaviour change is therefore a long and cumbersome process of changing values that are strongly rooted in a given society. The different churches and faith-based organisations can potentially play an important role in slowly changing the value base that informs people's behaviour, because they offer alternative sets of values. Or, as has been stated in Zimbabwe: 'religion plays a significant role in changing attitudes of people, as it brings hope in difficult situations'. Its value base can potentially offer a lasting positive alternative to deeply-rooted values that have a negative effect on behaviour. The challenge is to find and support the positive forces in the different churches and faith-based organisations to bring positive messages to their churches and the people.

### **Behaviour change**

The term 'behaviour change' has been misused and misapplied in the context of the HIV pandemic. It is too often invested with the meaning that prevails in the West/North, where behaviour change is believed to be a clear-cut matter of personal and informed choice; decisions taken by autonomous individuals based on in-depth understanding of the facts and a total ability to govern their own lives. This individualist view fails to recognise that behaviour is also influenced by circumstances and context and that for the majority of people affected by HIV in the South, and indeed in the North, the 'solution' is not so simple. The term 'behaviour change' is also occasionally invested with judgmental overtones implying fixed notions of what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' behaviour. This can sometimes be the case for programmes inspired by a particular cultural or religious ideal. In such situations the only acceptable behaviour change is one which complies with the ideal. Anything else is deemed unacceptable, even in the short term. Individualist and judgmental interpretations of behaviour change are both incompatible with the HIV prevention framework proposed above. In this framework, behaviour change for individuals is concerned with their capacity to identify and adopt risk reduction strategies appropriate to their circumstances, i.e. strategies that are realistic and sustainable.

Box 3. Source: *The reality of HIV/AIDS*

## **4. Conclusion and recommendations**

### ***Factors and actors***

For an AIDS response to be effective in the immediate as well as the long term, the complexity of the factors fanning the epidemic must be understood and recognised in each specific context. Equally so, it should be recognised that no single institution, organisation or project will not normally address all these factors.

It is recommended that each actor identify their part in the cycle and know who else is involved in contributing to it. In this way, the role and limitations of each actor can be clearly defined and respected, and different actors can work together in complementary, multi-sectoral initiatives contributing to a single AIDS response.

### ***Religion and culture***

In large parts of the developing world, unlike the more secularised western world, religion or spirituality is very much part of daily life. Religion and culture are carriers of values and beliefs that strongly determine individual behaviour. They are among the key factors that can contribute to fanning or hampering the spread of the epidemic. Acknowledging and understanding these different religiously and culturally determined concepts and values are a precondition for developing a more effective AIDS response. It is recommended to promote activities and processes of deeper reflection and learning about culture, religion and HIV/AIDS.

### ***The valuable role of churches, mosques and faith-based organisations***

Churches, mosques and faith-based organisations are among the actors that play a potentially valuable role in the international AIDS response, although it is clear that no easy generalisations can be made. The exact role should be looked at carefully in each specific context, but in general it can be stated that churches, mosques and faith-based organisations:

- are often active in areas of economic and social justice at family, local, national and international level, so tackling power imbalances;
- are among the most important providers of care, treatment, psychosocial support or livelihood initiatives that improve the physical health and economic and emotional wellbeing of people living with infection;
- also provide individuals and communities with an understanding of the risks to them and others of HIV infection and have clear messages, although not always providing accurate and full information, regarding risk reduction;

- have a long-term presence in regions and situations at risk, more often than other actors. They work for the most marginalised and are trusted by local communities;
- are also potentially able to influence the attitudes and behaviours of their community members by building on their relationships of trust and respect. Their value base can potentially offer a lasting positive alternative to deeply rooted values that have a negative effect on the behaviour regarding AIDS.

It is recommended for other actors to recognise the already valuable roles the different churches and faith-based organisations play in responding to AIDS and to support them in up scaling these valuable responses.

### ***Constraints and dilemmas***

- There is a tendency within churches and faith-based organisations to view HIV/AIDS mainly in a moral context. Although the case-studies show a significant change, HIV/AIDS is still used within some religions to promote church teaching on morality.
- Rather than accepting the clinical realities of the disease, some churches are using it as a tool for propaganda and conversion, encouraging only personal salvation as a way to cure HIV/AIDS.
- Factual knowledge is often absent. Assimilation of information (theological and factual) and behaviour change is a long process that requires long term commitment. Not all the actors in the process (e.g. donors) are willing to commit themselves for a long period.
- The case-studies show that, while mainstream churches enjoy considerable credibility and often have access to governments, their representation in coordinating mechanisms for HIV/AIDS is weak. Churches often still prefer to work as separate institutions.

### ***Recommendations***

However, (and here again, no easy generalisations can be made) the various churches and faith-based organisations could potentially play a more important role than they have done up to now. They still score rather low on a number of HIV/AIDS related attributes.

We recommend cooperation with churches on strengthening of these attributes so as to further maximise their potential in responding to AIDS. The following guidelines should be observed:

- Support the development of policy for dealing with HIV/AIDS within churches and faith-based organisations.

- Support processes, people and initiatives that promote further mainstreaming of HIV/AIDS into the theological functioning of the church.
- Support activities and processes that seek to address issues of gender inequality, sexuality and patriarchy by and in churches.
- Promote networking and collaboration with and between churches, and with faith-based organisations.
- Support ongoing formation on matters regarding HIV/AIDS of church and religious leaders at all levels.
- Support activities and processes that eradicate stigma and discrimination within churches.
- Provide more public and coordinated leadership in the struggle against the AIDS epidemic.
- Come over loud and clear in every possible way and overcome any silence and denial as part of doctrine and/or treatment of staff.
- Identify all forms of stigmatisation and develop active policies on de-stigmatisation.
- Encourage members to further action for the reduction of HIV transmission.
- Churches and faith-based organisations should use their enormous resources to eliminate poverty
- Churches and their faith-based organisations need to make themselves more visible and to clearly position themselves within the variety of actors working on HIV/AIDS.

Since churches are not homogeneous entities, it is worth identifying positive forces (including PLWAs) within the various churches, and supporting them in maximising their potential AIDS response.

### ***Churches and gender***

The issue of gender in relation to HIV/AIDS is mentioned in the definition of AIDS-competent churches: 'leaders have identified with and assumed their role in prevention of HIV transmission taking into consideration pastoral, cultural and gender issues.' However, the way in which church leaders themselves view gender theologically seems to be a non-addressed issue.

It is recommended that a focus on gender be integrated into theological AIDS work, not in the least because of the gender disparities involving stigma and discrimination – women are reported to suffer more from these exclusion mechanisms than men.

### ***Access to funds and networks***

While mainstream churches enjoy considerable credibility and often have access to government in times of national transition and crisis, their representation in coordinating mechanisms for HIV/AIDS is weak. However, their representation in these mechanisms is a vital link with long-term viability of their valuable HIV/AIDS interventions. Churches often lack the necessary skills to enable them to make use of this representation and/or are not aware of the need for collaboration with others (relevant religious and non-religious actors) in relation to their visibility and position. Many churches still prefer to work as separate institutions.

It is recommended that churches and their agencies adopt a more visible profile and position themselves clearly within the variety of key actors working on HIV/AIDS in a particular country.

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## 5. Religion and Conflict: strengths and weaknesses of faith-based peacebuilding

*A summary of the findings of five studies conducted for the Dutch Knowledge Forum on Religion and Development Policy*

### 1. Introduction

Depending on the context, religion can be either a catalyst of violence towards other groups or a reconciling factor, bringing people together with a message of forgiveness and peace. The main question here is how religious organisations – ‘faith-based actors’ – can help prevent conflict and build peace.

As part of its contribution to the Knowledge Forum on Religion and Development Policy, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs commissioned four studies, which were conducted by researchers working for the Netherlands Institute of International Relations at Clingendael:

1. *Faith-Based Peacebuilding: Mapping and Analysis of Christian, Muslim and Multi-Faith Actors*, by Tsjeward Bouta, S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana and Mohammed Abu-Nimer, November 2005 (‘Mapping study’);
2. *Stuck in Change – Faith-Based Peacebuilding in Sudan’s Transition*, by Ulrich Mans and Osman Mohammed Osman Ali, September 2006 (‘Sudan study’);
3. *Faith-Based Actors in Ituri, Democratic Republic of Congo: a Case Study of Religious Actors in a Conflict Setting*, by Pyt Douma, December 2006 (‘Ituri study’);
4. *Inter-Faith Peacebuilding: a Map of Religious Leaders in the Middle East*, Pamela Scholey and Teije Hidde Donker, yet to be published (‘Middle East study’).

In addition, a fifth study was conducted by IKV Pax Christi (an NGO member of the Knowledge Forum) and BBO (the NGO secretariat of the Knowledge Forum). The study, *Religion during the Conflict in the Balkans: the Role of Religious Leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (the ‘Balkan study’), was conducted by Albert van Hal (BBO) and Dion van den Berg (IKV Pax Christi), 2007.

The Mapping study presents an overview of the peacebuilding activities of several faith-based actors. The Sudan and Ituri studies examine the role of faith-based actors in post-conflict areas. The Middle East study (yet to be published) concentrates on the potential role

of local religious leaders in supporting the Middle East peace process. And the Balkan study presents a historical overview of the role of religious leaders in the Balkan conflicts.

This summary outlines the findings of these studies, their accounts of the role of faith-based actors in conflicts, their conclusions and their policy recommendations.

## **2. The strengths of faith-based peacebuilding actors**

What are faith-based peacebuilding actors? The Sudan study divides faith-based peacebuilding actors into five groups: active promoters, constrained contributors, silent supporters, potential spoilers and active spoilers.

On the positive side, active promoters are deeply involved in the peacebuilding process; constrained contributors are committed to peacebuilding but struggle to translate their positive attitude into concrete activities (for reasons such as lacking the necessary means); and silent supporters are committed to peace but remain inactive.

On the negative side, potential spoilers may not support the peacebuilding process and have developed a reticent attitude; and active spoilers do not support the peacebuilding process and actively undermine it.

The following subsection deals mainly with the first three positive, constructive, faith-based actors. According to the studies, faith-based actors can provide both social and moral/spiritual assets, making them potential contributors to conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives.

### ***Social assets***

For a number of reasons, the studies largely regard faith-based actors as social assets.

One reason is that most faith-based actors have a long history of involvement in the societies they serve. This is true not only of local actors but also of international actors, who tend to operate in countries for a long time. These actors are often very familiar with the context and history of conflicts, and they are able to engage in long-term peacebuilding before, during and after conflicts.

Moreover, faith-based actors have wide networks in the regions they serve and are able to use them to mobilise large numbers of people. This is emphasised in the Middle East study, which points to the credibility of faith-based actors among large groups of people.

The studies show that faith-based actors do not confine their attention to religious conflicts. Nor are they concerned only with coreligionists. This means that they can also help build peace in secular conflicts. In any case, boundaries are unnecessary between faith-based and secular peacebuilding. They can be interrelated and complementary.

According to the Sudan study, faith-based peacebuilding is not confined to 'religious moderates'. In certain circumstances, 'religious conservatives' can also encourage change and play a role in peacebuilding. The study says that individual leaders of faith-based organisations are most likely to encourage change.

As well as single-faith actors, multi-faith actors can also help build peace, depending on the local situation. The Sudan study concludes that, in Sudan for instance, multi-faith actors are the more suitable for organising inter-faith dialogue.

Faith-based actors are often involved in advocacy. They use their influence on education positively by incorporating peace modules into school curricula. On a bigger scale, too, faith-based actors have devised activities to promote reconciliation, inter-faith dialogue, disarmament, demilitarisation, and reintegration.

### ***Moral and spiritual assets***

First, faith connects people in search of a situation in which superior values – values like peace and human rights – are respected.

Second, faith-based actors have a moral and spiritual authority that gives them the leverage to ease tensions in religious conflicts and to serve as platforms for mutual understanding in non-religious conflicts. The Middle East study says that religious leaders, potentially and ideally, have the leeway to broker relations and build peace that political leaders often lack.

Third, the Mapping study emphasises peacebuilding activities organised by faith-based actors. These activities include encouraging coreligionists and others to change their behaviour, become less violent, and rehumanise the 'other'. Faith-based actors can sometimes challenge traditional perceptions and introduce new ways of thinking. This

enables them to provide emotional, psychological, and spiritual support to communities affected by war. The Balkan study sees a similar role for religious leaders, since they can assist in the return of displaced persons and refugees by creating a common understanding of the needs of returnees, irrespective of religion or ethnicity.

Fourth, the studies show that faith-based actors spread ideas about peace, peacebuilding, justice and development in their communities and mobilise their coreligionists and others for peacebuilding. They mediate between conflicting parties, and they connect coreligionists and others worldwide. The Middle East study emphasises that faith-based actors can give grassroots legitimacy to peace agreements by politicians by sanctioning such agreements and creating support for them. The most powerful endorsement for any agreement is popular support on both political sides. Endorsement by faith-based actors can reinforce that support powerfully.

### **3. Caveats**

But faith-based actors also have weaknesses that can prevent them from cooperating effectively in peacebuilding. These weaknesses sometimes relate to problems endemic to faith-based actors and sometimes to problems caused by their political connections.

#### ***Problems endemic to faith-based actors***

First, faith-based actors may use their commitment to peace in order to proselytise, especially if they do not distinguish between their missionary work and peacebuilding. Even if they do not explicitly proselytise, others might perceive them as doing so. According to the Ituri study, the peacebuilding efforts of constrained contributors and active promoters are undermined when they are perceived as using the extra influence gained via these efforts as a vehicle for proselytisation. According to the Sudan study, Muslims and Christians there still tend to concentrate on their own constituencies before considering or engaging with other faith-based groups.

Second, the programmes of faith-based actors often lack a focus on results. Since they tend to concentrate on long-term peacebuilding efforts – in themselves beneficial – they may fail to produce shorter-term peacebuilding deliverables.

Third, as the Balkan study observes, faith-based actors are often less professional than other peacebuilding actors. They are not, after all, professional peacebuilders. In other words, their

efforts cannot serve as a substitute for political and diplomatic peacebuilding efforts. And the Mapping study shows that international Muslim peacebuilding actors are less developed than international Christian and multi-faith actors. This makes Muslim peacebuilding actors less visible in international relations.

***Problems caused by the political connections of faith-based actors***

Faith-based actors may have strong ties to political movements or governments, as in Sudan. The Sudan study maintains that religion there is part of the political power game and that faith-based actors, like the rest of civil society, have to struggle within a highly restrictive environment imposed by government control.

When this is the case, as the Middle East study shows, faith-based actors run the risk of losing legitimacy among adherents of other political movements. When conflicts arise, religious communities tend to follow political initiatives, and not vice versa. Every issue perceived as religious is somehow connected with politics. Many observers argue that intra-faith dialogue must not be allowed to become a substitute for justice achieved via political means. If faith-based actors become too involved in dialogue on political issues, it may undermine respect and support for them among their followers.

Similarly, certain religions may be so closely connected with certain ethnic groups that they lose their credibility among members of other ethnic groups. The Balkan study calls this a major risk. In Bosnia, ethnic and religious communities overlapped widely. In the Bosnian wars, ethno-religious commonality was the basis for alliances between nationalist and religious leaders. Nationalist political movements used religious leaders and their communities, which then radicalised, applauded the violence and escalation, and supported nationalism.

As to the international church-related organisations, their desire for dialogue can prevent them from adopting clear-cut positions on war atrocities. Dialogue can be misused by politicians and religious leaders. According to the Ituri study, most faith-based actors there were clearly less successful in their peacebuilding efforts during the conflict than afterwards, mainly because they themselves were heavily divided on tribal lines.

#### **4. Conclusions and recommendations**

##### **Why and how should faith-based peacebuilding be supported?**

###### ***Active cooperation***

Most of the studies regard faith-based actors as potential partners in peacebuilding. They recommend that donors should address the potential of faith-based peacebuilding when devising policies for promoting peace, security, and stability. Donors should also cooperate more closely with faith-based actors in peacebuilding and examine the role of faith-based actors in stability assessment frameworks (an analytical tool used by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs for drawing up stability strategies).

The Sudan study concludes that the international community has access to various entry points for supporting faith-based peacebuilding. International actors could actively promote a more enabling, less restrictive, political environment, so that faith-based actors will enjoy greater freedom to develop their activities.

###### ***Supporting reconciliation and overcoming divisions***

The Ituri study maintains that the connections between religion and politics can also give the international community a major opportunity. It advises the international community to support the activities of faith-based actors to reconcile their followers, overcoming the tribal divisions among them. Once faith-based actors have overcome such internal difficulties, they will be better able to help reduce ethnic tensions in society at large. This process will help sustain peace from within.

The Balkan study calls on faith-based actors to become more self-critical. All the actors involved in a conflict should evaluate their own actions and interventions and announce their findings publicly. The search for truth is also a task for religious leaders and their communities. The Middle East study points out that, where religion and politics are almost indistinguishable, human rights should be a topic for dialogue within and between religious communities.

###### ***Recognising less visible, less measurable results***

The findings of the Mapping study were discussed at a conference held in The Hague in November 2005. Although the study's overall analysis was not contested, delegates pointed out that governments sometimes concentrate too narrowly on short-term results. The

demand for quantifiable results sometimes goes too far, especially when imposed as a condition for aid money. Governments should appreciate the benefits of the less visible, less measurable, progress achieved by improving relations between different groups. This, too, is essential for sustainable results.

While governments are best placed for preparing and concluding official peace agreements, faith-based actors can play a very useful role in the parallel process of reconciliation and long-term stabilisation. This division of tasks reduces the impact of the weaknesses of faith-based actors and fully recognises their strengths.

### ***Demanding international attention***

Governments should draw international attention (in the EU, OECD-DAC, OSCE, and UN) to the contributions of faith-based actors. They should also sensitise and train their foreign missions to include faith-based peacebuilding in their annual and multi-annual plans.

The Balkan study points out that IGOs and diplomats often know little about the position and role of religion in communities. Diplomats, like politicians, often underestimate the influence of religious leaders and are unaware of the deeply rooted dynamics that motivate religious communities.

IGOs and foreign missions need to gather information on how religion affects communities: not only the facts and figures, but also the 'language' of religion. Even though religious leaders adopt political positions, they are not politicians, and they need to be addressed as such. The Balkan study therefore recommends special attention for religious communities in the assessment frameworks and context analyses that IGOs and foreign missions regularly draw up. IGOs and foreign missions should also develop working relationships with religious leaders and others who could play a key role in dialogue within and between religious communities.

### ***Rebuilding places of worship***

The Balkan study adds that the reconstruction and preservation of religious heritage merits attention following conflicts in which religious sites and places of worship have been destroyed.

## **Who needs to be involved?**

### ***Hardliners***

The Mapping study says that both 'religious moderates' and 'religious conservatives' need to be involved. The Middle East study agrees, emphasising that religious and political 'hardliners' should be included in peace talks. This can add to the legitimacy of negotiations and avoid spoiling the peace process. Experienced Middle East watchers say that negotiations in the region are often flawed because they involve a relatively closed group of moderates who reinforce each other in their thinking and approach. If hardliners are included, new ideas will be generated and popular support will grow.

### ***Multi-faith actors***

The Sudan study recommends emphatically that external donors should encourage multi-faith as well as mono-faith actors in attempting to promote dialogue.

The Balkan study similarly recommends that support for inter-faith dialogue should be based on an approach whereby the external partner has an equal relationship with all the religious communities involved. If the external partner has a special relationship with one of the communities, it will have less leeway for facilitating dialogue.

The Ituri study says that the international community needs to understand the dynamic between different religions in a region. It also says that all actors, religious or not, should be judged on their ability to perform activities transparently and inclusively. For faith-based actors, this means that they need to dissociate peacebuilding from proselytisation.

### ***Muslim peacebuilders***

The Mapping study says that special attention is needed to develop tailor-made approaches for identifying Muslim peacebuilding actors, since they tend to be less visible and sometimes take the form of relief or humanitarian agencies. Tailor-made approaches could be developed for strengthening Muslim actors.

### ***International church-related bodies***

Finally, the Balkan study emphasises the importance of international church-related bodies, which have the potential for facilitating dialogue within and between religions. When conflicts arise, a stronger international network of religious bodies could help prevent radicalisation

while supporting members of religious communities who favour peace. In the Balkans, such a network could have provided the religious communities with an alternative to alliances with nationalists and isolation – in the form of international partnership.

## 6. Religion and Ecological Sustainability: *Beyond the technical fix*

'Driver of change' is not a values-free concept. It suggests that change is the norm, whereas not all change is desirable. For example, biodiversity is worth preserving, so changes that alter biodiversity may be counterproductive. Where change is needed, its direction should be specified. Change should not be made simply for its own sake, but rather for deeper reasons, such as justice. Ideas like 'universal relevance' and 'applicability' are often connected with change, but these concepts should not be taken for granted. Like earlier western concepts of 'social engineering' and 'change agents', these concepts fit within varieties of socio-cultural settings that should be subjected to critical scrutiny.

Religion as a Driver of Change in Ugandan Education. By Wim Westerman and Laurus van Essen, for the ICCO Alliance, 2007

### 1. Introduction

The way human beings relate to the nonhuman natural world is strongly influenced by religion. All religions, whether global or indigenous, include narratives and practices that shape their followers' attitudes towards the plant and animal kingdoms, the earth and its cycles, the moon and the planets, the stars and the cosmos. Given the widespread influence of religions in the modern world, their significance for environmental sustainability can hardly be overrated.

The seventh Millennium Development Goal (MDG) focuses on environmental sustainability. Participating nations have chosen to strive for three related targets:

1. To integrate the principles of sustainable development into national policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources
2. To reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water

3. To achieve significant improvements in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020

The first target denotes broad concern for the sustainability of ecosystems. The second and third targets focus more narrowly on the sustainability of human communities within these environmental systems. In each case, the effectiveness of national policies in reaching these targets will depend on the degree to which they incorporate the factor of religion.

Other MDGs also affect and are affected by environmental sustainability, albeit indirectly. The first goal, the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, provides a case in point. On the one hand, poverty and hunger tend to increase stresses on ecosystems. For example, the deforestation of Haiti will continue as long as the poor must cut trees to produce charcoal for a bit of cash. On the other hand, stressed ecosystems tend to increase the likelihood of poverty and hunger. In Haiti and many other deforested regions, flash floods from eroded hillsides destroy the fields and villages of the same poor who are forced to cut down the trees. Achievement of the first MDG is therefore intertwined with achievement of the sustainability goal. There are similar relationships between other MDGs.<sup>1</sup> By implication, the significance of religion for environmental sustainability extends beyond the seventh MDG.

## **2. HOW RELIGION AFFECTS ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

Religion affects how people relate to nonhuman nature – for better or for worse. The ambiguity of this relationship has stirred debate ever since the 1967 publication of a controversial article by UCLA historian Lynn White, entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis."<sup>1</sup> White traces modern environmental problems to Christian attitudes towards nature. By rejecting pantheism and focusing believers on otherworldly salvation, argues White, Christianity set the stage for an attitude of exploitation that spread around the world with the spread of Western technology. In order to reverse the environmental crisis, he suggests that we cultivate instead an attitude of humility towards the natural world. This attitude is found particularly in Eastern religious traditions, although the Christian St Francis of Assisi also provides a counter-cultural example.

Two lasting and more nuanced insights have emerged from the heated debates sparked by Lynn White's article.<sup>1</sup> Effective national policies in support of the seventh MDG should take both into account.

First, religion particularly affects environmental sustainability by shaping human *attitudes* towards nonhuman nature. This process is currently snowballing. As Mary Evelyn Tucker

and John Grim, leading scholars on the topic, observe in the Spring 2007 issue of the journal of the Yale Divinity School:

[A] many-faceted alliance of religion and ecology along with a new global ethics is awakening around the planet. Attitudes are being reexamined with alertness to the future of the whole community of life, not just humans. This is a new moment for the world's religions, and they have a vital role to play in the emergence of a more comprehensive environmental ethics. The urgency cannot be underestimated. Indeed, the flourishing of the Earth community may depend on it.<sup>1</sup>

Attitudes tend to produce enduring patterns of thought and action, often lasting a lifetime. For example, people who genuinely care about forests and rivers are likely to engage in lifelong study of these natural communities, to notice harmful changes, and to take protective and restorative measures when necessary. Thus, some of the first warnings about climate change came from the Inuit, whose deep respect for their Arctic regions – to them respect for the *inuait* or spiritual owners of the universe – enabled them to notice and warn of a warming trend well before it was confirmed by mainstream climatologists. Religious involvement in nurturing such environmental attitudes significantly increases the chances of achieving the seventh MDG.

Religious *beliefs* as well as *practices* shape human attitudes towards nonhuman nature. Beliefs, often embedded in narratives, give people an interpretive framework that provides them with purpose and direction as they relate to the natural world. Religious *practices*, such as rituals, role-fulfillment, and community structures, offer matching guidelines, models, and support systems for relating to the nonhuman world. Together, religious beliefs and practices help to foster a wide range of attitudes that can be characterized as environmental virtues: wonder, respect, sensitivity, attentiveness, care, gratitude, patience, courage, self-discipline, and the list goes on (there are at least 189<sup>1</sup>).

Second, the debates generated by Lynn White's article have yielded the nuanced insight that all religions have the potential to foster both helpful and harmful attitudes. For example, Chinese Buddhism encourages an attitude of humility towards the nonhuman world, as expressed in the preference for a vegetarian diet. However, in the past Chinese Buddhism also contributed to the deforestation of China, through widespread construction of wooden temples. Achievement of the seventh MDG will significantly depend on cautious realism regarding the involvement of religious traditions in policy development.

Fortuitously, many religious practitioners are already engaged in critical reflection on the ambiguous environmental records of their traditions. They have moved from defensiveness to constructive activism, characterized by interreligious cooperation. For example, the language of the Earth Charter (a global consensus document in support of a sustainable future, endorsed by 2,400 organizations including UNESCO) carries the mark of extensive and self-critical interreligious dialogue.<sup>1</sup> National development policies and programs in support of the seventh MDG will be significantly enriched by incorporating the results of these advanced efforts.

### **3. INITIATIVES, MOVEMENTS AND ORGANIZATIONS**

Religious beliefs and practices currently inspire a plethora of initiatives, movements and organizations in support of a sustainable environment. Development agencies seeking to orient themselves in the burgeoning field of green religion will benefit from two seminal reference works:

- Religions of the World and Ecology Series:<sup>1</sup> the most comprehensive resource available, this series includes ten volumes with contributions from religious and environmental leaders. The Forum of Religion and Ecology continues to organize conferences and issue publications.<sup>1</sup>
- The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature:<sup>1</sup> the seminal encyclopedia for the field. The website presents sample articles, associated activities, and links to related professional organizations.<sup>1</sup>

These core reference works also contain details and background information about many of the initiatives, movements, and organizations listed below, each of which offers distinct opportunities for development agencies working to achieve the seventh MDG.

#### *World religions*

Mainstream religious organizations and their leaders regularly issue statements that explicitly delineate their environmental beliefs and practical commitments. The website of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation provides an overview.<sup>1</sup> Such statements can have considerable influence. For example, when United Methodist women worked with Greenpeace to persuade their Christian denomination to accept a resolution in favor of ‘sunsetting’ the use of chlorine in the manufacturing of paper and plastics, they jolted the US chemical industry into a seven-year stakeholder dialogue that significantly shaped its sustainability policies.<sup>1</sup> Development agencies seeking to raise public support for the seventh

MDG, both at home and abroad, could significantly enhance their efforts by partnering with mainstream religious organizations that are demonstrating ecological leadership.

### *Grassroots movements*

At grassroots level, religious attitudes can significantly contribute to environmental sustainability. In India, for example, the Hindu attitude of respect for life, expressed in the practice of seed-keeping, has inspired the 'seed satyagraha' movement, a successful grassroots resistance effort against Monsanto's patented 'suicide' seeds (genetically engineered to be sterile after the first planting). Similarly, many participants in the 'other globalization' movement are guided by indigenous spiritual attitudes towards nature. Some new and newly revived religious movements, such as Gaia, Wicca, desert spirituality, and many New Age groups, even encourage holistic attitudes to the point of erasing the distinction between human and nonhuman nature. Development agencies can benefit significantly from listening to the people involved in such religious grassroots movements, for example through stakeholder dialogues and expert panels. Here beats the pulse of green religion, and those open enough to hear it will get a jump start in finding out-of-the-box *and* politically savvy ways to approach the seventh MDG.

### *Natural scientists*

While the mainstream natural sciences thrive by avoiding undue influence from biases, moral values and religious beliefs, a growing number of natural scientists now publicly discuss how their personal faith does in fact provide inspiration and perseverance for their scientific work. A field biologist, for example, may report a deep sense of awe as she explores the complex relationships of a wetland ecosystem. Several religious scientists have become international leaders in the environmental movement, exactly because the connection between their faith and their scientific knowledge led them to understand the need for environmental action (e.g. Hindu physicist Vandana Shiva, who focuses on the role of women in building sustainable communities<sup>1</sup>). Development agencies working towards the seventh MDG would benefit from consulting with religious scientists in the environmental movement. They tend to be well attuned to local ecological *and* cultural conditions, which allows them to know much about locally appropriate technologies.

### *Business and finance initiatives*

Religious attitudes towards nonhuman nature also increasingly inspire commercial initiatives. Many sustainable farms are run by people whose respect for the soil and the weather, whose care for crops and livestock, and whose understanding of the natural roles of 'pests' and 'weeds' have a distinctly religious dimension. Similarly, today's manufacturers include deeply

spiritual visionaries who dedicate their lives to producing solar panels, low-budget water purification systems, and organic clothing. Some initiatives to green the financial branch, such as the Triodos Bank, can also be traced to a religious vision. Development agencies working towards the seventh MDG can multiply the effect of their efforts by leveraging their resources with the considerable expertise and funds of the religion-inspired, green private sector.

### *Politics*

Today's politicians, too, include a growing number whose dedication to sustainable development is rooted in religious attitudes. For example, behind the vision of the Earth Charter lies the pantheistic spirituality of Mikhail Gorbachev. And while many members of today's green parties have moved away from the religious traditions of their upbringing, a good number carry out their environmental mission with overtones of religious zeal. In secularized societies, such as the Netherlands, the religious dimension of green politics may not (yet) be prevalent in official public discourse. However, it does flourish in networks and virtual platforms (such as 'De Linker Wang', loosely affiliated with GroenLinks, the Dutch green left alliance party<sup>1</sup>). In working towards the seventh MDG, development agencies sail on a political wind with increasingly religious overtones. By staying attuned, they will also increase the *political* sustainability of their programs.

### *The creative arts*

In the creative arts we also see the confluence of religious attitudes and commitment to environmental sustainability. Examples abound, involving all art forms. In Nigeria, for instance, Susan Wenger's sculptures have helped to protect the Osun groves at Oshogbo, sacred in Yoruba religion. The site has become a symbol for the intertwining of ritual and art with flora and fauna.<sup>1</sup> Development agencies would do well to respect and learn from such intertwining. It suggests that hitting the mark of ecological sustainability requires more than a technocratic fix. In order to respond adequately in each unique natural location, people need attentiveness, inspiration, and creativity. This exactly occurs where religion and art enter the picture.

### *Non-governmental organizations*

Finally, the environmental activism of an increasing number of NGOs and ENGOs has roots in religious traditions as well as less conventional spiritual practices. In the Netherlands, for example, the Encounter of Worldviews Foundation seeks to support sustainable development through the spiritual transformation of world leaders.<sup>1</sup> This trend has significant potential for creating the catalysts needed to speed up the process of reaching the seventh

MDG. Development agencies interested in staying current, rather than clinging to dated sustainable development policies (read: anxiously secular and technocratic policies), should keep a finger on the pulse of this trend. They could engage the new spiritual leaders of civil society at a strategic level (for example, on advisory boards), looking to leverage agency expertise with the advantage of vision rooted in spiritual wisdom.

#### 4. TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES

Policy makers new to the possibility of engaging religion in working towards environmental sustainability will quickly notice a familiar pattern: the tensions that mark green activism in general also permeate green religion. Religious organizations and individuals may diverge significantly in the following areas affecting sustainable development policy:

- A. attitudes towards nonhuman nature;
- B. attitudes towards modern science;
- C. attitudes towards wealth, consumerism, and free trade;
- D. the question of how to balance human and ecological sustainability.

Development agencies can use their experience in dealing with the diversity of secular green activism to navigate these tensions of green religion as well.

##### *a. Attitudes towards nonhuman nature*

While most religions today profess the importance of respect for nonhuman nature, they may diverge significantly on how this attitude is best expressed. Advocates of environmental *stewardship* seek to express respect through responsible management of natural resources. Guided by a theology of divine providence and task delegation, stewardship advocates assume that people can and must acquire the necessary knowledge and technology to manage the environment. They are hopeful and confident. Consequently, they tend to look favorably upon development efforts. By contrast, advocates of ecological *attunement* seek to express respect through harmonization with nature. Guided by holistic teachings, attunement advocates assume that people can never know enough about the complexities of the natural world to manage it well. They try to be humble and accept their vulnerability as human animals. Consequently, they tend to favor a hands-off, precautionary approach, which puts them at odds with more aggressive development efforts. Despite this tension, development agencies can expect to learn from both sides.

##### *b. Attitudes towards modern science*

Significant diversity also exists in religious attitudes towards mainstream modern science. Some see a fruitful continuum between science and religion, allowing the results of ecology, toxicology, epidemiology and risk assessment to inform their attitudes and environmental actions. Trusting mainstream risk-benefit analysis, for example, religious organizations may favor limited use of DDT for mosquito abatement in the fight against malaria. Others see a paradigm clash between modern science and religion. Inferentially distrusting scientific findings, they tend to follow intuitive, holistic, often indigenous ways of knowing that fit more naturally with their religious beliefs. Religious groups following this paradigm are likely to oppose use of DDT for mosquito abatement. Governmental development agencies should prepare to interact with both sides in the field, because each is widely represented and crosses regional and religious boundaries.

*c. Attitudes towards wealth, consumerism, and free trade*

A third tension involves diverging religious attitudes towards wealth, consumerism, and free trade. This tension has significant implications for environmental sustainability, because economic systems affect ecological systems. A good number of religious people interpret personal wealth as a sign of divine reward. Consumerism is their divinely given right. Trusting divine justice, they welcome free trade as its economic mechanism. Many Pentecostals in developing countries, for example, affirm such a 'Gospel of Wealth' theology, at the risk of ignoring its environmental impact. By contrast, other religious people cultivate attitudes of simplicity and gratitude, interpreting consumerism as the worldly vice of greed. They warn that free trade may be an ideology serving corporate greed, hurting both the poor and the natural environment. Their loosely networked movement, represented by a large diversity of religious communities, has significant potential for helping to achieve the goal of environmental sustainability.

*d. Balancing human and ecological sustainability*

Finally, religious people diverge in their assessment of the appropriate balance between human and ecological sustainability. Although many relegate the issue to divine responsibility, in practice most religious people do prioritize and favor either human or environmental interests. *Anthropocentric* choices tend to be inspired by religious narratives teaching hierarchical cosmic dualism. Humans are put at the top of an earthly ladder of creatures. Their interests may trump nonhuman interests; to think otherwise would be misanthropy.<sup>1</sup> For example, in this view the development of new housing for slum dwellers should override the habitat need of an endangered species of butterfly. By contrast, religious narratives teaching cosmic holism tend to inspire *biocentric* choices. Humans are one life form among others and will have to make sacrifices when their actions (or even their mere existence)

threaten general conditions for life on Earth. To think otherwise would be speciesism.<sup>1</sup> Development agencies should be prepared to encounter both sides in the field, often embroiled in controversies with very practical implications for environmental sustainability.

Although significant, these four tensions do not warrant the conclusion that development agencies would be better advised to steer clear of the religion factor. That would be a naive mistake. Each of these tensions has its parallel in secular discussions and communities. The complexities involved in dealing with them cannot be avoided by excluding religious communities from development efforts.

Instead, development agencies will be *more attuned to the field and therefore work more effectively* if they ‘grab the bull by the horns’ and learn how the familiar diversity that characterizes environmental activism in general also plays out in religious circles. This should not prove too difficult. It may also help those policy makers who are new to the religion factor to orient themselves in the field by means of familiar political coordinates. As they will soon discover, much that goes by the name religion is, above all, ‘human, all too human’.

## **5. Recommendations**

The transformation of human attitudes from ecologically harmful to ecologically fitting is a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition for environmental sustainability. In most regions of the world (secularized pockets being the exception), religious involvement is a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition for such attitudinal changes. Although religions have historically not always fostered environmentally constructive attitudes, nowadays most aim to do so. Where they succeed, they provide the world with essential human preconditions for environmental sustainability. Achievement of the seventh MDG depends on this contribution from the world's religions.

Development agencies can benefit in multiple ways from paying attention to religious initiatives, movements and organizations. The recommendations discussed above are summarized below:

- Raise public support for the seventh MDG, both at home and abroad, by partnering with mainstream religious organizations that are demonstrating ecological leadership.

- Identify out-of-the-box and politically savvy ways to approach the seventh MDG by listening to the grassroots movements of green religion (for example, through stakeholder dialogues and expert panels).
- Learn about locally appropriate technologies by consulting with religious scientists in the environmental movement. For they tend to be well attuned to local ecological *and* cultural conditions.
- Multiply the effects of sustainable development programs by leveraging agency resources with the considerable funds and expertise of the religion-inspired, green private sector.
- Increase the 'political sustainability' of agency policies and programs by staying attuned to the increasingly religious overtones of green politics.
- Hit the mark of ecological sustainability by looking beyond a technocratic fix: learn about the indispensable value of attentiveness, inspiration, and creativity from locations where natural flora and fauna intertwine with human ritual and art.
- Avoid the risks of clinging to dated sustainable development policies by strategically engaging the new spiritual leaders of civil society (for example, on advisory boards). Look to leverage agency expertise with the advantage of vision rooted in spiritual wisdom.

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