

RELIGION AND GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT:

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CURRENT DEBATE FROM A DEVELOPMENT POLICY PERSPECTIVE

Helmut Reifeld

Religion plays a key role in the development of almost every country. In development cooperation, this applies both to the evaluation of the conditions in developing countries and to the motivation and justification behind development aid. The new publication dealing with this issue which is under discussion here shows why development cooperation ought to pay greater attention to the influence of religion.¹

The issue of how important religion can be for the development of a country and, thus, for the success of development policy, is nothing new. There are various standard works on religious sociology as well as a more recent spate of studies examining the links between religion and violence in politics and society worldwide. In addition, there is now also a huge volume of empirical material on global shifts in values, the various forms of secularization and the religious implications of the various understandings of the modern world. Furthermore, any exploration of this issue should not take just one specific religion and examine its influence on the development of a country; instead, the relationship can by all means be seen as reciprocal, and the results may differ depending on which religion is examined. It is



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1 | cf. Jürgen Wilhelm and Hartmut Ihne, eds., *Religion und globale Entwicklung. Der Einfluss der Religionen auf die soziale, politische und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2009).

therefore surprising that the first sentence of the foreword (which the author additionally emphasizes) in the recently released volume on "Religion and Global Development" states: "Religion is enjoying a renaissance!"² After all, as many of the articles in this volume demonstrate, the rise in religious beliefs is not attributable solely to the current proliferation of research.

On the contrary: in actual fact, religion as a factor barely featured in the majority of handbooks on development policy published in recent years. In the volume on "Future Issues in Development Policy", the editors do not devote so much as a sub-chapter to the issue of religion. They merely concede that the "cultural factor" is growing in importance in the context of the increasingly rapid process of globalization and that development policy is, "frequently based primarily on normative grounds". However, they accept the validity of the power of such normative reasoning only with regard to humanitarian aid. Of the seven main reasons that, in their view, support "implementing development policy in one's own best interests", the seventh and final reason is that development policy is "an instrument of foreign policy based on the principles of solidarity, human rights and mutual assistance – and thus is also a value in itself [...] a moral imperative"³. In the handbook "An Introduction to Development Policy" the editors proceed from the observation that "ethical and cultural aspects [...] have a far greater [influence] on development" than the "mainstream of development cooperation, based on technology and dictated by the economy, would lead one to think"⁴. The authors identify various ethical "dilemmas" in the form of conflicting goals. They present a series of possible explanations, but fail to deal with the political issue of the possible religious or normative impetus for development and thus for development policy decisions. The list of possible reasons presented culminates (from a negative point of view) in the obligation to dispense with

2 | *ibid.*, p. 9.

3 | Dirk Messner and Imme Scholz, eds., *Zukunftsfragen der Entwicklungspolitik* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2005), pp. 26 - 27, p. 30.

4 | Hartmut Ihne and Jürgen Wilhelm, eds., *Einführung in die Entwicklungspolitik*, vol. 4 of *Einführungen in die Politikwissenschaft*, 2nd edition (Münster: Lit, 2006), p. 322. cf. also pp. 323 - 364.

development aid altogether.⁵ While many of the authors cite “own best interests”, and refer throughout to “development aid”, they do not at any point mention the possibility of a genuine religious justification - not even when explaining the concepts of ‘solidarity’ and ‘subsidiarity’.

In contrast, the volume on “Religion and Global Development” also published by Ihne and Wilhelm and presented here, provides a comprehensive exploration of the most important links between religion and development from various perspectives. However, as is the case with many collected works, the system used to compile the 22 articles is not always convincing and the significance

of the various articles also varies greatly. The result, unfortunately, is that this book also contributes to the current negative image of collected works. It nevertheless bridges a gap in the literature currently available on development policy, particularly in view of the fact that the majority of the articles are well worth reading.

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The volume includes a series of excellent articles that examine far more than the all-too-common and simplified observation that religion can both promote and hinder human development. Many authors explore the intrinsic understanding of development in the various world religions. By also investigating the issue of how important the development of others is for individual religious followers, the authors highlight the sometimes diverging stances of the donors and recipients of development aid. Ultimately, the issue always centers on religion as a core area of difference, and, as such, the “equal footing” of partners that can be so difficult to achieve. Often, however, it is precisely this difference that is decisive for the success or failure of development cooperation.

RELIGION AS AN IMPETUS FOR DEVELOPMENT

While the interdependence of religion and human development was omnipresent in earlier sociological and religious science literature (from Max Weber and Émile Durkheim to Hans Joas and Samuel Huntington), development experts

5 | *ibid.*, pp. 332 - 333.

appear to have lost sight of this link over the last few decades. While the supposed “resurgence” of religion in the recent past may strengthen the view that religion is experiencing a “renaissance”, this is by no means a new phenomenon in development policy.

The contribution by Hartmut Ihne in particular provides some convincing limitations to the societal role played by religion in human development.⁶ His starting point is far from revolutionary: is religion a stumbling block for scientific progress or does it drive and encourage it? The

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answer to this question results in a series of ethical and pragmatic political consequences.

According to his main hypothesis, it is not only in the context of globalization and by no means only in Europe that religion must be seen as a vital prerequisite and impetus for human development. Religion “provides both guidelines for interpretation and meaning as well as scope” for the actions of each individual and for societal groups. Even in largely secular and secularized states, religion influences political discourse. It not only shapes the mentality and motivation of individual believers, but also constitutes “a force that influences, and, indeed, aims to influence, reality”. Although there may always be a risk of the abuse of religion as an instrument of political power, religion and culture not only sustainably fill a vacuum in political orientation, but also, in their guise as a “collection of historical, enduring collective characteristics and behavior of mankind”, they “ultimately [constitute] the core of the creation and interpretation of politics”.

In a critical examination of Samuel Huntington’s views and his concept of rival cultural circles, Ihne outlines the limits of any claim to universality. Only the acceptance of a growing interdependence of values, the desire for peace and religious norms can gradually lead to a form of pluralism that draws more on mutual respect and less on the desire to enforce one’s own claim to truth. There is no doubt that religion will continue to be an element

6 | cf. Hartmut Ihne, “Religion, Rationalität und Entwicklung”, in: Jürgen Wilhelm and Hartmut Ihne, eds., *Religion und globale Entwicklung. Der Einfluss der Religionen auf die soziale, politische und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2009), pp. 149 - 167.

of every form of political power. However, in an increasingly globalised world, there is greater room for maneuver between consensus and dissent, in favor of consensus and potential cooperation.

While it may be difficult for some readers to share Ihne's optimism, his plea for more attention to be given to the power of religion, its potential for creating peace and its readiness for rational discourse, is nevertheless appealing. The "Global Ethics Project" to which he refers could provide an impetus for this, particularly as it has always placed more emphasis on the harmonious and mutually beneficial co-existence of various religions in the same geographical area seen many times throughout history rather than any conflict.

RELIGION AS A CONTRIBUTOR TO DEVELOPMENT

Two specific articles in this volume each deal with one of the two largest religions, each with more than a billion followers worldwide, Christianity and Islam. Hinduism and Buddhism are also examined in separate articles. The series of individual articles examining the term "development" from the perspective of various religions begins with the article by Jamal Malik.⁷ In so doing, he took on the particularly challenging task of competing against a large number of limited perceptions, as well as a multitude of preconceptions and half-truths. Without entering into any fruitless controversies, he underlines the historic and regional diversity within the Islamic world. He describes the Islamic traditions of public interest (masala), the welfare system (waqf) and alms giving (zakat), which are based – despite all their differences – on similar considerations to Christian-influenced social policy, even if in Islam these seldom go beyond the Islamic religious community. It is nevertheless true that Islam – probably more so than the other major world religions – is in need of "political

It is nevertheless true that Islam – probably more so than the other major world religions – is in need of "political non-dramatization" and, with regard to its development policy potential, is worthy of considerably greater attention than it has been afforded in the last few years.

7 | Jamal Malik, "Islam und Entwicklung", in: Jürgen Wilhelm and Hartmut Ihne, eds., *Religion und globale Entwicklung. Der Einfluss der Religionen auf die soziale, politische und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2009), pp. 40 - 50.

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How difficult it is to outline the contribution, the impetus and the influence on concrete policies exerted by a religion on the development of a country in just twenty pages becomes particularly clear in the text by Jürgen Thiesbonenkamp. While his description of a concept of “development from a Christian biblical perspective” does not claim to take account of the entire spectrum of “development services” rendered by the Christian Church, his examples nevertheless provide an excellent preliminary overview. His own starting point is the “conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation”, postulated at the WCC 6th Assembly in Vancouver in 1983. However, he also deals with liberation theology, the self-image of some partner churches in developing countries and the concept of an “option for the poor”. His special interest lies

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in the origin of Christian development services in missionary work. The greatest challenge of the conciliar process was said to have been conveying the “new identity” of development cooperation since the 1970s in light of the “decreasing acceptance of missionary programs and the increasing importance of dialogue between religions”. For Thiesbonenkamp, the vital impetus for all forms of Christian development cooperation is expressing “the values and the practices in its Christian nature”.⁹ He sees a great many of the traditional missionary aims alive and well even in contemporary forms of development cooperation. The reasons he provides for this are less considerations of welfare and more an “enlightened” comprehension of partnership. Thus the objective of the poor cannot be to be freed from poverty, but rather – in the spirit of freedom and justice – to be able to free themselves from poverty and injustice to the best of their capabilities. However, particularly against this background, it is even

8 | This term originates from Heiner Bielefeldt. cf. Malik (2009), p. 49.

9 | Jürgen Thiesbonenkamp, “Das Konzept von Entwicklung aus biblisch-christlicher Perspektive”, in: Jürgen Wilhelm and Hartmut Ihne, eds., *Religion und globale Entwicklung. Der Einfluss der Religionen auf die soziale, politische und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2009), pp. 89 - 111.

more important to know more about the specific “self-help” ideals of the various new churches in developing countries. While this may in many cases prove extremely ambivalent, it certainly deserves more attention than it has garnered in the current debate on development policy in the donor countries.

While Thiesbonenkamp, who lived and worked as a naval priest in Cameroon for seven years, has both academic knowledge and practical experience, the two articles on Hinduism and Buddhism were written from the perspective of a scientific observer. Each description of these two religions with regard to their influence on human development must, however, differ greatly from that relating to Christianity (or even Islam) in terms of the issues. Clemens Six concentrates from the outset on the socio-economic effects of Hinduism. For him, development is merely a “descriptive umbrella term” that should be understood in the most expansive terms. Specifically in regard to Hinduism, only two aspects are of importance to him: “Firstly, Hinduism is a habitus, that is, a pattern of behavior that visualizes history and tradition and has a comprehensive influence on the present. Hinduism as a habitus has consequences for people’s perceptions, way of thinking and actions. Secondly, the religious focus in Hinduism lies not on the content of the faith or an orthodoxy, but on embedding the individual in a socio-religious organization”. The conclusions the reader should draw from this consist of a wide spectrum of “traces” of societal modes of perception, thinking and action, as well as several indicators of the highly complex caste system, which Six interprets in “complete isolation” from the religion. Thus, in respect to the main topic of the book, he concludes merely that “with reference to the macroeconomic development of India”, Hinduism can likely be presented neither as a basic hindrance to, nor as a factor that encourages development.¹⁰

10 | Clemens Six, “Hinduismus und Entwicklung – sozioökonomische Auswirkungen eines religiösen Habitus”, in: Jürgen Wilhelm and Hartmut Ihne, eds., *Religion und globale Entwicklung. Der Einfluss der Religionen auf die soziale, politische und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2009), pp. 51 - 63.

By contrast, a much more detailed and simultaneously more tangible picture is painted by Mirjam Weiberg-Salzmann in her depiction of the role played by Buddhism. The strength of her article is her focus on the peace-promoting and stabilizing elements of this religion. Although the scriptures of all of the major religions feature prohibitions of murder and encourage the development of peace, in Buddhism this aspect is a particularly clear core element. Generally, every action that causes suffering results in negative Karma. At the same time, Buddhism has always been capable of adapting to different societal structures and approaches. Each individual is and remains responsible for his own actions, his own salvation and his own thoughts. While good and evil alternate in a continual cycle, this means that all suffering can always be conquered by good. However, the focus is almost exclusively on the wellbeing of the individual, not the community: "In addition, Buddhism places far greater emphasis on individual responsibility for oneself and the education of one's own spirit than on the development of society as a whole"¹¹.

Most of the authors that contributed to this volume focus their attention not on the assumed "essence" of a religion, but rather on the possible political actions that are based on religious reasons, on the influence of religious political movements in the context of international relations and development cooperation, as well as on the connection between religion and the readiness to use violence in political conflicts.

With the help of several examples, Weiberg-Salzmann illustrates the extent to which this also harbors great socio-political potential. For B. R. Ambedkar, the leader of the untouchables in the Indian independence movement, Buddhism provided a model for a "societal structure free from innate inequality". By means of organized mass conversions, however, he also attempted to exert political pressure. Another example

is the self-immolation of the monk Thich Quang Duc in 1963 in Saigon, which led to a close-knit union of a large number of Buddhist independence initiatives, creating a strong impetus for a global freedom movement. The Dalai Lama's approach, which is free of any violence, is held in high esteem. This is ultimately the reason why his struggle for political freedom for the Tibetan people has gained so much support worldwide. Both succeeded in finding

11 | Mirjam Weiberg-Salzmann, "Die Rolle des Buddhismus in Entwicklungs- und Transformationsprozessen", in: Jürgen Wilhelm and Hartmut Ihne, eds., *Religion und globale Entwicklung. Der Einfluss der Religionen auf die soziale, politische und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2009), pp. 64 - 88, here p. 66.

a place for universal values, in particular human rights, within Buddhism. A contrasting example can be seen in the Buddhist Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka. The author concedes “that it was specifically the religion that led to the escalation in the conflict, boycotted peace initiatives and legitimized violence”¹².

At the same time, these examples show the ease with which a religion – and not only Buddhism – can be used to promote political interests. The danger of reducing the character of a religion to its basic principles is a risk to which those articles in this volume that endeavor to find the development policy profile of a specific religion are particularly susceptible. No religion can per se serve as a replacement for a lack of desire to shape development policy. Religions are also subject to historical change and are reinterpreted again and again. The peaceful doctrines of Buddhism remained largely impotent in the face of Pol Pot’s rule of terror in Cambodia. In India, meanwhile, the Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal or Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh can call for violence against Muslims in the name of Hinduism, while the Ramakrishna Mission supports socio-political projects (some of which involve Muslims) in the name of Hinduism. In the same way, Hamas or Hezbollah can invoke violence against Jews, while Jews and Palestinians work side by side in social development projects in a series of NGOs in Israel. The articles collected in this volume illustrate how much each religion can contribute to the development of a country; however, the flip-side of this coin can also demonstrate how religion can inhibit development.

RELIGION’S SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR VIOLENCE

Most of the authors that contributed to this volume focus their attention not on the assumed “essence” of a religion, but rather on the possible political actions that are based on religious reasons, on the influence of religious political movements in the context of international relations and development cooperation, as well as on the connection between religion and the readiness to use violence in political conflicts. In many regions of conflict around the world today, those in positions of political power draw

12 | *ibid.*, p. 79.

on religious arguments to legitimize violence, exclusion or underdevelopment. This may at times be blatant and aggressive and at others it can almost go undetected. But can these examples be generalized or even linked to the character of a specific religion? To what extent is it possible to prove any direct effect of key statements of a certain religion on violent conflict and thus on a country's development potential? How much of a valid statement can be made if even Ulrich Beck utters sweeping statements like, "religion kills"¹³?

Andreas Hasenclever put forward the best depiction of this problem area.¹⁴ He demonstrates in three stages firstly, "that many academics overestimate the role of religion in violent conflict". Individual studies on Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Nigeria, Kosovo or Chechnya illustrate that the causes of civil war cannot be explained simply by the fact that there are people of different faiths on the opposing sides. The alleged "renaissance" of religion is not causally linked with any increase in violent conflict. On the contrary: as a rule, it is economic crisis and the disintegration of the state that increase the risk of civil war, particularly in developing and transition economies. It is first and foremost ethnocracies, not discriminated religious minorities, which resort to violence. Traditional elites that use religious arguments for strategic gain play a central role in this context. This can be seen frequently – but by no means exclusively – in Islamic countries. The causal links between these kinds of violent processes, however, always follow a very "secular logic".

In a second stage, Hasenclever examines the risk of crisis escalation posed by religious statements, since religious followers involved in civil war situations in particular are especially susceptible to religious slogans. Since dogma is "non-negotiable", religion develops a mobilizing power and can influence the development of conflict in the long term.

13 | Ulrich Beck, "Gott ist gefährlich. So human Religion auch scheinen mag, sie birgt stets einen totalitären Kern." in: *Die Zeit*, December 19, 2007, p. 12.

14 | Andreas Hasenclever, "Getting Religion Right. Zur Rolle von Religionen in politischen Konflikten", in: Jürgen Wilhelm and Hartmut Ihne, eds., *Religion und globale Entwicklung. Der Einfluss der Religionen auf die soziale, politische und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2009), pp. 170 - 186.

Countless studies confirm that in nearly every region of the world, parties to conflict who recognize an opportunity to use religion to support their actions will do so. What is decisive is thus not the content of this public communication, but rather the way in which it can be used.

Thirdly, Hasenclever correctly points out the peace-making potential of various religions - potential which has not been sufficiently taken into account in the discussion on development policy to date. By no means does this apply only to Buddhism; there is evidence relating to nearly all other religions that religiously-motivated players are not only part of the problem, but can also be part of the solution. This applies both to appeals for peace in general, and specifically to the involvement of religious believers, e.g. in the Truth Commission in South Africa; the various projects of the Catholic laypersons organization Sant'Egidio; the frequent intervention of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani in respect of the readiness of many Shiites to use violence following the invasion of American and British troops in Iraq, and much more. As Markus Weingardt comprehensively documented, the extraordinarily high credibility of religious players in conflict situations is based on their recognized "impartiality, fairness and discretion"¹⁵. However, this is acknowledged far too rarely.

INCREASED INVOLVEMENT OF RELIGION IN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

The World Bank obviously also had an influence on the creation of this book. On the title page, reference is made to a two-page foreword by James D. Wolfensohn, who was president of the World Bank Group from 1995 to 2005. Probably the most important article in this book for specific development cooperation is by Katherine Marshall, who worked in this field at the World Bank for 35 years.¹⁶ Marshall establishes in a comprehensive, differentiated and reliable

15 | Markus Weingardt, *Religion. Macht. Frieden. Das Friedenspotential von Religionen in politischen Gewaltkonflikten* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), p. 183.

16 | cf. Katherine Marshall, "From Confrontation to Partnership - Religion and Global Development at the World Bank", in: Jürgen Wilhelm and Hartmut Ihne, eds., *Religion und globale Entwicklung. Der Einfluss der Religionen auf die soziale, politische und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2009), pp. 261 - 294.

manner that people who act on the basis of their religious beliefs in particular exert a vital and lasting influence on the form of development in all developing regions. It was, and continues to be, religious people (most often Christian

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institutions and individual followers) that cultivate land, fund schools and help the disadvantaged. However, beyond their direct individual efforts, they triggered developments, mobilized support and made use of opportunities to exert influence. They often had a wealth of experience, broad trust and creative design potential, which is not found

as often in purely secular institutions. As such, they ought not to be seen as just one of many NGOs, but rather in many cases as representative of a central aspect when evaluating the conditions under which development is likely to succeed.

Despite many words of praise and the large number of positive examples cited by Marshall, she pays just as much attention to recurrent problems. Her reservations and doubts are targeted first and foremost towards the fact that faith and politics must be kept separate. This relates not only to the concrete instrumentalization of development aid for missionary attempts, but also in very general terms to the various forms of legitimization. She sees a second area of conflict in the stance of many religious leaders on issues relating to birth control, preventative healthcare and equality for women. A third problem area she identifies lies in the decreasing acceptance of religion in modern, secularized societies. This results in part in restrictions on religious freedom, as well as in resistance and obstructions to religiously motivated development assistance (suspicion of proselytization). This often prevents development policy organizations from providing assistance to projects and being able to appropriately take sides in conflicts involving religious groups.

The World Bank provided a very positive example of the way in which a purely secular development organization can deal openly with the issue of religion in its "World Faiths Development Dialogue" in 2000. The World Bank wanted to react to the growing prominence of religion, in particular in developing countries, not in spite of, but specifically

because of rapid globalization. Despite the resistance of the French government of the time, this initiative enjoyed a positive reception worldwide and provided new impetus for this process of dialogue in 2006.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Which impulse is this volume likely to trigger? Is it enough to state in conclusion that "The subject 'Religion and Development' demands more sensitivity and professionalism, more openness to new interpretations and processes", and to establish that "people are more important than programs. People who contribute a perspective enriched by religion"¹⁸? This may be enough to prompt greater consideration of the factor of religion in German development policy. However, the book's systematic claim originally went far beyond this. Many questions remain unanswered, both with regard to the generalized statements regarding the position and the contribution made by various religions in respect of development, and with regard to religious pluralism, which, in itself, is capable of creating highly positive conditions for development.¹⁹ Placing completely different religions side by side implies that they have a common character, a shared essence, which is easy to project, but cannot be demonstrated. Talking about "the" religions furthermore fails to take account of their respective individual historic development and contextual links. Perhaps most importantly, however, traditional, indigenous religions, which often play a role in the evaluation of development opportunities, frequently go unnoticed. As a result, the collection of articles included in this volume fails to fully do justice to the variety and, more importantly, the intrinsic diversity of religious manifestations.

Any in-depth consideration of the links between religion and development should explore on the direct level whether and how development policy goals can also be

17 | *ibid.*, p. 273 et seqq.

18 | Hans-Dieter Lehmann, "Religion in der deutschen Entwicklungszusammenarbeit", in: Jürgen Wilhelm and Hartmut Ihne, eds., *Religion und globale Entwicklung. Der Einfluss der Religionen auf die soziale, politische und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2009), p. 338.

19 | Amartya Sen cites various examples of the importance of religious pluralism for the development of India, in: *The Idea of Justice* (Harvard: Harvard University Press 2009).

justified on religious grounds. Here, there is no need for any kind of enforced ideological neutrality. On the indirect level, the main issue is dialogue on religious values and norms as a necessary component of development cooperation. This is important when evaluating framework conditions and the feasibility of projects. In addition to social order, the economy, the political and legal system and the cultural traditions of developing countries, the religious communities active in this country also play a crucial role in its development. Religious values exert a crucial influence on the actions of both the donors and the recipients of development aid. However, these values apply only to the extent that individuals provide reasons for them and support them. While they can bring people together, they are equally capable of driving them apart and can sometimes even be used to exclude "the others". Irrespective of whether or not we refer to the global phenomenon currently in progress as a "clash of cultures", religion is central to identity all over the world.