

Religion and Development – Key Issues in Global Change

Is Religion an Obstacle for Development?

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“Los profesionales de la Inteligencia
no encontrarán el camino de la fe;
lo encontrarán las multitudes.”
José Carlos Mariátegui¹

An important part of Development cooperation originated from church work. Precisely mission agencies have played a pioneering role. Yet, today faith-based organisations are facing the question whether they do serious work at all.

Actually, not only state authorities ask critical questions about the meaning of religion in development cooperation. A short time ago, the head of a *faith-based* relief organisation told me – and I quote: «The churches are of no use for development cooperation. They are neither efficient nor professional. Perhaps they are not even part of the solution, but part of the problem.»

That „churches“ and „development assistance“ are criticised so differently made me think. How come that precisely churches or „faith-based organisations“ are considered a stumbling block for development? Are there also reasons having to do with the comprehension of development? What is actually the relationship of religion and development?

1. „Religion is a Stumbling Block to Development“

This statement clearly shows the position of the European modern age as to religion: enlightenment cannot tolerate religious obscurantism. This is nothing new. However, how is it possible that a majority of today’s development specialists – including those that are working for faith-based organisations – seem to think along such lines? After all, the target groups of this work in the South do not seem to have such great problems with religion.

Very often, one comes across the answer that religion is supposedly serving as support and accomplice to oppressive systems. The close interconnection of the Roman Catholic Church with the colonial regimes and later dictatorships in Latin

¹ José Carlos Mariátegui, *El hombre y el mito* (1925) in: *El alma matinal*, Lima 1950, p. 28.

America is an obvious example for this. What is interesting to see however is that the most biting criticism of religion was created in the bosom of religion. Liberation theologians such as Franz Hinkelammert or Yvone Gebara actually analysed the „ideological weapons of death“ towards the poor and the „dark side of God “ for women; and religious socialists such as Leonhard Ragaz, Josef Hrómadka or Helmut Gollwitzer radically criticised churches and religion.

One first observation: In the *Theologies of Liberation* it is the „cry of the poor“ or the „cry of the earth“ (L. Boff), the discrimination of women or the violation and devastation of indigenous cultures that lead to criticising religion and churches. In this criticism, faith manifests itself. It means believing in a „God with an Indian face“, in a „Christ the worker “ (Nicaraguan „Misa campesina“) or Mary, „Mother of the poor “ (Y. Gebara).

Yet, the starting point is different if *experts of development* cast suspicion on religion: Religion or churches are considered obstacles to „development“. We need to question ourselves: Which criteria lead us if we pronounce such a judgment on religion? Which standard is our measuring stick? Obviously, there is a normative element in the term „development“ itself. How does this yardstick look like?

2. Development – a Western Concept

The present concept of development is first of all an offspring of the Marshall Plan for the European economy after the Second World War. In a second step, the concept was applied to the Third World countries which were called „underdeveloped“ and which were urged to follow the development model of the First (or Second) World. Hence, the development discourse is clearly a European, Western product.

My thesis is that the way in which ODA (official development assistance), but also non-governmental and even faith-based development cooperation see development is marked by ones own modern, secular and Eurocentric models for development policy. It functions like a hidden standard, exactly because no one challenges and works on it. And this hidden standard determines the development concepts for the countries of the South.

This is shown among others in the lack of reflection on the meaning of religion in development cooperation. It seems symptomatic to me that most relief organisations and aid agencies have not enough understanding and sensitivity for this issue. Although we talk about international cooperation here, there is – amazingly enough – not much awareness for questions of cross-cultural understandig on the Boardroom floor and in head offices.

But now, state agencies and even the World Bank rediscover the role of religion. Religion is no longer a taboo. In this respect, in 2002, the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) initiated a process of reflection on the meaning of religion and spirituality in development cooperation. Recently, the SDC published two readers with case studies, and a third reader will follow.²

² Anne-Marie Holenstein (Hg.): Entwicklung und Religion, Reader 1: Erfahrungen aus christlich geprägten Umfeldern. Vier Fallbeispiele zum Umgang mit Potentialen und Risiken; Reader 2: Erfahrungen aus islamisch geprägten Umfeldern. Berne 2008 (www.deza.admin.ch/ressources/resource_de_164418.pdf).

There is no doubt that this process of reflection has contributed to rediscover religion as a key factor in development processes. At the same time, other blind spots appeared. One example: SDC developed together with NGO's an instrument of analysis for how to deal with the potentials and risks of religion and spirituality in development cooperation³.

The question rose immediately whether the faith-based organisations and missions that are supported by the SDC would express a critical attitude towards claims to religious absoluteness. However, it was much more complex to accept that there are also non-religious claims to absoluteness. But the most difficult thing for all stakeholders was to reflect on the value concepts and orientation systems hidden in one's own rational discourse. Hence, the normative point of view of the Western development thinking was almost no issue, although the cooperation partners in the South are in the end judged according this Western development thinking – despite all the verbal respect for the cultural and religious diversity shown to the partners in the South.

Equally, the exploitation of religion for political purposes was an issue in the preparation of the mentioned instrument of analysis; in particular, in view of countries, in which so-called „modernisation processes have failed“. First and foremost, this referred to the so-called „Islamic Fundamentalism“. Yet, no reflection was devoted to the «fundamentalisation» of religious or political positions in Europe or in the USA.

Implicitly, interpretive categorizations seem to contain great powers of classification in which „religion“ functions as key category. Amartya Sen has drawn the attention to this fact. In his critique of Samuel Huntington's influential 1998 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, he says: “The difficulty with Huntington's approach begins with his system of unique categorization. ... Indeed, the thesis of a civilizational clash is conceptually parasitic on the commanding power of a unique categorization along so-called civilizational lines, which closely follow religious divisions .. Huntington contrasts Western civilization with ‘Islamic civilization’”.⁴

Amartya Sen rightly states: “In partitioning the population of the world into those belonging to ‘the Islamic world’, ‘the Western world’, ‘the Hindu world’, ‘the Buddhist world’, the divisive power of classificatory priority is implicitly used to place people firmly inside a unique set of rigid boxes. .. This reductionist view is typically combined .. with a rather foggy perception of world history that overlooks .. the extent of internal diversities within these civilizational categories”.⁵ However, this is also true today for the frequently invoked "dialogue among civilizations". The interpretive categorizations are equal to those of Huntington, and they generate power over others – actually, with the help of “religion”.

Second observation: Religion thus remains somehow suspicious, in particular the religion foreign to us. Primarily, it seems to be a problem and a risk factor.

³ DEZA, Leitfragen und Qualitätskriterien zum Umgang mit Potentialen und Risiken von Religion und Spiritualität in der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit, in: Entwicklung und Religion. Schlussdokument: Folgerungen für die Praxis. Methoden und Instrumente, Bern 2009.

⁴ Amartya Sen, Identity and Violence: the illusion of destiny, New York and London 2006.

⁵ L.c.

3. Why is Religion Considered as an Obstacle to Development?

I am of the opinion that there must be a more serious reason than simply anticlerical attitudes of individuals. It has to do with the role of the development discourse which was born in the womb of an illuminated modern age and which was marked by the disenchantment of the worldviews the modern age brought along. Scientific-technical progress replaced heaven with its concept of infinite progress. This progress is managed by rational acting in the sense of Max Weber. This type of action pursues ends by using the means the best possible way. In the course of totalised market relations its formal property of increasing efficiency is turned into the top criterion of how to judge the validity of all values.

A machinery has been set in motion that follows the principle of ever-increasing efficiency and of perfecting the means. In the meantime, this machinery has conquered all areas of life, including development cooperation. Even more: it seems that in the triumph of the instrumental reason a re-enchantment of development cooperation is taking place which is reincarnated in a series of religious leading figures. The modern age now knows a series of fetish terms such as the guiding principles of progress, growth, modernisation and rationalisation – and now also the term of „development“. This term has taken on a formal, but at the same time substantial and legitimising character giving him a quasi-religious „infallibility“.

Max Weber himself spoke about the „old gods“ rising from the tombs; how they are „disenchanted and therefore rising in the form of non-personal powers“, and how they are striving for power over our lives⁶. The gods that were pushed out of the heaven of religions now return as idols of the market.

Third observation: If it is correct that „development“ occupies the place of religion and is given a quasi-religious status, then, it cannot tolerate that other religions could continue to exist next to it and could challenge its leading role. Let us take a closer look at this hypothesis.

4. The Religion of Development

The Dutch social anthropologist Oscar Salemink has dealt with this question and written a book published under the title «The Development of Religion – The Religion of Development». His thesis is: «The mission of development cooperation was to <modernize> which in practice implied making <them like us>. As written in Genesis 1:27: So God created man in his own image.»⁷

According to Salemink development shows sacral traits. He reminds us about the *Millennium* Development Goals expressing a kind of secular chiliasm. „When Jean and John Comaroff coined the term millennial capitalism to denote the unpredictable, often religious and quasi-magical forms of wealth accumulation in our re-enchanting world, the U.N., G8 plus, Bono and Geldof were busy debating the Millennium Development Goals that were supposed to make poverty history.“ He states: “It is ironic to note that decades after the emancipation of development from its missionary

⁶ Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (1919), in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, Tübingen 1973⁴, P. 604.

⁷ Oscar Salemink et al.: *Faith-Based Development Initiatives as <Prosperity Religions>? Reflections on Religion and Development*. Presentation for the Conference «Religion and Development: Crisis or New Opportunities?». VU University Amsterdam. June 2007.

roots development is again sacralized by the charisma of celebrity heroes“ – of charismatic figures from the world of mass media culture.

The message of these Pop-prophets says: Poverty alleviation is a question of financial means, technology and of the markets. This means, a gospel of technical progress and of prosperity for all is being preached.

And indeed, in development cooperation you find a cult of technical professionalisation, of efficiency and scientific impact assessment. This cult is connected to the instrumental reason prevailing in the capitalist economy. In Saleminks words: «This market <fundamentalism> has been accompanied by seemingly de-politicised, technocratic notions of <professionalism>, that reduce political issues to management techniques”.

Development thus is transformed into a kind of capitalist panacea. This can certainly be expressed in direct religiousness. Just think of the TV-evangelists in Latin America such as Luís Palau: They preach prosperity and – in view of the fears that are triggered off by the crises of the system – they preach individual salvation. «The idea of prosperity and the slogan ‚Save yourselves from an omnipotent market’, these are recommendations that perfectly match the neo-liberal positions “.⁸

Already in 1921, the German author Walter Benjamin described capitalism as religion. He termed it as a pure cultic religion, capitalism has no specific body of dogma nor theology. An extreme form of cult, emphasizes Benjamin: „Capitalism is the celebration of a cult – sans rêve et sans merci (without dream or mercy). Therefore, there are no ‚weekdays’. There is no day that is not a feast day.“⁹

This cult without end and limits has a peculiarity, which distinguishes it from most of the other religious cults: it does not lead to atonement, but into a vicious circle of indebtedness. And it leads up to an „expansion of despair, until despair becomes a religious state of the world “¹⁰, and the only way to salvation is more of this cult.

Today we experience this merciless indebteding character of capitalism in the financial and economic crisis, but also in the destructive effects of climate change. The human and ecological devastations are „side effects“ of a development that is accumulating debts. An economy that is based on the combustion of fossil fuels leaves behind a carbon debt, which other people of other continents will have to pay for. The victims of climate change pay – mostly after generations – the interests and compound interests of the debt that our growth model accumulates.

If in this sense capitalism is a church service that sacrifices victims, then this cult can only replace the Christian one out of which it historically originated. Capitalism will not tolerate any other religion next to it. There will be no room granted for another spirituality that is not willing to adapt to it. And in particular, it does not tolerate the biblical religion that would entail liberation from laws that bring about debt and death.

⁸ The Argentinian sociologist of religion Fortunato Mallinaci. Palau was one of the 12 spiritual leaders who Bush summoned as advisors after the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, Kapitalismus als Religion, in: Gesammelte Schriften, vol. VI, Frankfurt/M 1985, p. 100.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 101.

The „capitalist cult“ shares a series of further elements with other universalistic religions. It claims to have sole access to truth. And it also disposes of missionary instruments, which are applied whenever a conversion to the cult and the Gospel of capitalism is required. Oscar Samelink is of the opinion that development aid is the specific quasi-religious authority that propagates and enables this conversion. The conversion shapes the „transition“ where there is need for it: In the countries that were not capitalistic in the past, in regions that are not yet pervaded by the global market, in those cultures that are not yet compatible with the rationality of the global market society.¹¹

The „transition“ takes place on the macro- or meso-level of the society. However, the transition will only be successful when people are converted also on the micro-level. Some churches and charismatic enterprises – such as the Igreja universal do Reino de Deus in Brazil – play an important role here. They preach the Gospel of prosperity and individual success to the poor. And it cannot be denied that with their promise of salvation they listen and respond to the expectations and desires of many people. In a certain sense, they offer a piece of «good news», in particular to those, who pay for the costs of the capitalist cult, but do not see or get anything of said prosperity. The religion of consumerism with its lifestyle-cult and their winner-idols – e.g. Nike-shoes – is especially attractive for those who are excluded from the blessings of capitalism.

What is the attitude of our churches here? Are they only using the revived longing for a meaning of life and religiousness for their own means, to get in the limelight on stage and create mass impacts? Do they content themselves to supply the people who are held in the iron casing of economic rationality with a suitable „emotional design“ and spiritual ingredients? Or do they discover germ cells of productive resistance and forward-looking alternatives in their own nonconformity and resistance to modernisation? If so, they could contribute their share to a critical revision of the concept of development and help deepen an alternative discourse, which is not growth-centered.

The prevailing understanding of development personifies, as David Korten puts it, „the masculine ideal of competition, empire and conquest. It is intrusive and individualistic“¹². Basically, this understanding of development is the embodiment of a „deserted evolutionary logic “ as J.B. Metz once put it.

Thesis: We need a Critique of development reason / of the development discourse. It must break up the fetish character of the understanding of development and disclose the underlying standards of economic rationality. These unchallenged preconditions must become the object of democratic debates about the goals and intentions of development policies. Development must focus on human beings and peoples, and not be growth-centered. It must serve the preservation of life.

5. Religion as Productive Obstacle for Development

¹¹ Salemink underlines: that this effort at conversion operating like a gigantic steel hammer is very deliberate and focused, preferably targeting countries in transition which have to be converted from Socialism to capitalism. He substantiates this with studies on the transitions in the highlands of Vietnam: First, the «traditional human being» is replaced by a «new socialist human being» and finally replaced by the «new capitalistic human being». The indigenous cultures are forced to adapt to this development.

¹² David Korten, Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda, West Hartford 1990, p. 168.

In the eyes of many, mission represents an antiquated form of development cooperation. Should it therefore modernise at a fast pace? In some respects maybe yes. Not everything traditional is good per se. Churches and religious institutions were ever so often part of the shaping and maintenance of power structures; they supported and justified patriarchal and colonial systems.

But the old-fashioned, the rootedness in old traditions is also a chance. From the distance to the “up to date” some important questions can be asked:

- Could it be possible that there is excessive progress in development cooperation?
- Progressing too much “from the utopia to science“, from faith to believing in technology, from political disputes about social development goals to professional project management?
- Do the questions – that are justified per se – about harmonization and impact assessment of development programmes not lead to a perfecting of technologies, whereas it should rather be about realizing a comprehensive participation of people when defining their development options?

Fortunately enough, not everything fits into economic rationality. It is the duty of the churches to look after the other bulky elements of religious traditions, which are less easy to be integrated. The “dangerous memories“ (J.B. Metz) of struggling communities of faith have a special place, especially those that carry the virus of a biblical-prophetic search for justice. Equally, indigenous or Afro-American movements that are not close to the church tell us many things. They draw from a history of „Mysticism and Resistance“ (D. Sölle) and may contribute a lot to a re-politisation and decolonisation of the development thinking, because they were created in conflicts with the political, economic or cultural hegemonic powers.

Thus, religious traditions have normative elements that criticise civilisation and that are helpful for criticising Western development patterns. By transforming into a *productive* „obstacle to development“ they can lead us to development with a human face.

However, not every form of religiosity or spirituality is suitable here. It depends on their position in society. It is no coincidence that concepts driven by the theology of liberation originated in the context of dictatorships and anti-colonial or social movements and were inspired by the resistance of indigenous cultures that have lasted for centuries.

The forms of northern faith-based development cooperation, however, mainly originated from the emergency assistance of the post-war period. Of course, they have further developed and have gone over from strategies of relief and welfare activity to programmes of the „second“ and „third“ generation; now they support programmes of the local community development and of sustainable development. But basically they remain *aid*-agencies.

The churches, demands the South African theologian Ignatius Swart¹³, should adopt an approach of the „fourth generation“. They should realise that they could only play a meaningful structural and transformative role in development .. if they manage, in one way or another, to become part of the policy-making processes at various levels of society (micro, meso and macro). According Swart, churches can make an important contribution because they can be understood as institutions, that are educated in their own distinctive way in a ‚politics of ideas‘, and which perceive their primary task to be the changing of minds, conscience and behaviour of human beings and other institutions as the state and government. The main feature of this fourth generation approach however is that *new social movements* are the primary subjects of its development action and theory.

As jubilee 2000 or the World Social Forum shows, it is possible to create an interlocking of these new social movements with communities that summon from the fund of religious traditions; it can be fertile for both sides. In Europe, churches often put themselves into the centre of their activities. It is rather an exception that they cooperate in networks of grassroot movements. Let us see whether they realise in times of crisis that they themselves originated from such a movement!?

This social movement approach to development seems to be important to me, because here „the cultural element merges with the aspect of spirituality, values and ethics“¹⁴. Essentially, the women, youth or peace movements simply want to create a culture emanating from horizontal relationships. Johan Galtung called it the „Beta-Structures“. Solidarity, „Passion and Compassion“ (Ana Maria Tepedino) play a central role – and not competition, empire and conquest. The conflicts about development are actually a debate on culture.

If churches participate in this, they can rediscover their own mission. And it is finally a mission which is „to bring good news to the poor .. liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people“ (Luke 4, 18ff).

Postscript as to the Work of Bread for All

The interconnection of solidarity and spirituality is vital for the educational work of *Bread for All* in the field of development policies. This can be seen in the annual ecumenical campaigns; here, the political and prophetic dimension of social welfare work (diaconia) is being emphasised.

In order to sensitise project and programme responsables of its partner organisations for questions of religion and development, Bread for All has developed specific instruments. A case study on a mission 21-programme in Peru can be found in one of the SDC readers.¹⁵ Bread for All also supports a research programme of the Ecumenical Institute for Andean Theology (ISEAT) in La Paz as to the issue of

¹³ Cf. Ignatius Swart, *The Churches and the Development Debate. Perspectives on a fourth generations approach*, Stellenbosch 2006, p. 5ff.

¹⁴ Swart, p. 231.

¹⁵ Annette Dietschy, *Religion und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in Peru. Potentiale und Risiken einer FBO am Beispiel von CEDEPAS*. In: Reader 1 (see footnote 2), p. 19ff.

„Religion and Development in the Andean region “¹⁶. The results will be presented at a symposium in Berne in June.

¹⁶ So far, four volumes have been published: *Religión y desarrollo en los Andes*, *Entre los muertos, los diablos y el desarrollo en los Andes*, *Identidades y Religión* und *El laberinto de la curación* (all published by ISEAT, La Paz 2008).