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RELIGIONS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

From Overlooking to Commodifying Faiths?



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Religion and Sustainable Development:
The Journey from Why to Engage to A Plea for Caution

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Abstract

A decade ago, talk about religion in public spaces was largely limited to discussions about either theology, or terrorism - or both. Today, the role of religious organizations - whether churches, mosques, temples, or faith-inspired NGOs delivering critical development and humanitarian services, or religious leaders - is more normal a concern for both governmental and intergovernmental entities. Most Heads of State, or Government Ministers, in the so-called developed world, have at least one speech per year where they mention the role of "religious leaders," when talking about developmental contexts as diverse as climate change, peace-making, or healthcare.

How did we get to the point where many of us working in and about development now talk - and work - on 'religion and development'? What are the implications of increasing engagement with certain so-called 'religious actors' on our social and political landscapes - particularly when it comes to human rights?

In the following presentation, I attempt to provide a responsive series of narratives to these questions. I first present the background to my understanding of the terminology of development and the ways in which I perceive this unfolding universe of engagement. I then move on to showcase the rationale for why religion and development are a 21st century reality, and conclude with a critical review of the pros and cons of the nexus between religion and development today.

"To truly listen is to risk being changed forever"-- Northrup Frye

In general terms, "development" refers to an event constituting a new stage in a changing situation, or the process of change per se. If not qualified, "development" is implicitly intended as something positive or desirable. When referring to a society or to a socioeconomic system, "development" usually means improvement, either in the general situation of the system, or in some of its constituent elements. Development may occur due to some deliberate action carried out by single agents or by some authority preordered to achieve improvement, to favorable circumstances in both. Development policies and private investment, in all their forms, are examples of such actions.

Amartya Sen's concept outlined in *Development As Freedom* remains one which is acclaimed and relevant. He argues that human development is about the expansion of citizens' capabilities. For Sen, freedom means increasing citizens' access and opportunities to the things they have reason to value. In 1999 - i.e. almost two decades ago, Amartya Sen described the context of the world in terms, which are eerily familiar to what we live through today. He noted:

... we ... live in a world with remarkable deprivation, destitution and oppression. There are many new problems as well as old ones, including persistence of poverty and

¹ All opinions expressed in this paper belong to the author alone and are not reflecting positions by any institution, organization, board or territory. I am indebted to Dr. P.L. de Silva for support in compiling an annotated bibliography and editorial comments for this paper.

unfulfilled elementary needs, occurrence of famines and widespread hunger, violation of elementary political freedoms as well as of basic liberties, extensive neglect of the interests and agency of women and worsening threats to our environment and to the sustainability of our economic and social lives. Many of these deprivations can be observed, in one form or another, in rich countries as well as poor ones.

We have to recognize...the role of freedoms of different kinds in countering these afflictions. Indeed, individual agency is, ultimately, central to addressing these deprivations. On the other hand, the freedom of agency that we have individually is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us. There is a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements. It is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom. To counter the problems that we face, we have to see individual freedom as a social commitment²

Expansion of freedom is viewed, in this approach, both as the primary end as well as the principal means of development. Development consists of the removal of various types of restrictions that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency.

The Development Paradigm

If a paradigm in Kuhn's sense (1970) means a common framework, a shared worldview that helps to define problems, a set of tools and methods, and modes of resolving research problems, then development may be understood as a series of debates. The development paradigm therefore, is a multilayered knowledge concept, and an evolving process.

I would affirm here that the development paradigm rests on a cornerstone belief in the pursuit of human freedom and advancement, a classical theme that may be traced to more than two millennia ago, especially to Plato and Aristotle's ethical claims about social engineering and the quest for the good life. Foundational to the enlightenment as well, such perspectives have come to embrace rationality. They actually resonate with the writings of Amartya Sen and others about how to reduce constraints and expand the scope of collectivities to be free to choose among alternatives. In its different iterations, the development paradigm continues to be a vision about emancipation from the blockage that limits choice and opens policy space. The goal being to establish self-sustaining growth and build the capacity for realizing human potential.

But how can self-sustaining growth be realized, given the contexts of multiple and simultaneous volatility in which we live today? Joseph Stiglitz (2012), in his seminal work on "Macroeconomic Fluctuations, Inequality, and Human Development"³ argues that "the economic consequences of volatility go far beyond the loss of [Gross Domestic Product] GDP ... there are also further effects: the loss of well-being from increased insecurity; the deterioration of health; the loss of human capital; the adverse effect on well-being from the increase in crime that typically results—including increased expenditures on 'defensive measures.'"

² Amartya Sen (2000) *Development as Freedom* <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/s/sen-development.html?mcubz=1> (accessed 5 June, 2018)

³ *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities: A Multi-Disciplinary Journal for People-Centered Development*, 2012: 13:1, pp. 31-58 - <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2011.643098> (accessed on 25 July 2018).

Stiglitz stresses that issues of inequality and human development, on the one hand, and instability, recessions and recovery, on the other, are intertwined. But Stiglitz also emphasized that the effects of the policies adopted to respond to a recession may be long-lived, especially where this concerns human development. The policy implications of his analysis point to the fact that even if governments were not directly concerned with social justice and the distributive consequences of policy, to promote a more stable economy with a smaller likelihood of a downturn, they still need to be mindful of, and attentive to, inequality.

The World We Want and the SDGs/Agenda 2030

The concern for equality is at the heart throughout all of the needs identified in 2015, through a global conversation facilitated by the United Nations, to seek “citizen feedback and active participation in determining the global development priorities.” The conversation is estimated to have actively involved over 2.5 million people, and was entitled the “World We Want.” The Goals, which were eventually developed and agreed upon by 193 governments, were termed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and are also referred to as Agenda 2030 (since they supposedly ‘end’ - i.e. should be achieved by 2030).

These ‘conversations’ showed that many people around the world knew precisely what kind of world they want to live in. The top issues identified noted education appearing as the number one need, followed by *access to* education and quality health care for all. In addition, there was a significant percentage of those who identified ‘honest and responsive government’ at a par with those who noted ‘access to decent jobs.’⁴ These were closely followed by food security, gender quality and freedom from fear and violence.

Enter the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although often misrepresented as “the UN goals” the processes involved in coming up with the SDGs were arrived at only minimally through the ‘World We Want.’ In large measure, the processes were shepherded by 193 Member States, under the auspices of the United Nations, and through UN offices’ facilitation, and were adopted by all states of the United Nations on September 2015.

This [SDG] Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom. We recognise that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan. We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want ... to heal and secure our planet. We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps, which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path. As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets which we are announcing today demonstrate the scale and ambition of this new universal Agenda...They seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental.

⁴ Corresponding to these two needs, SDG 16 notes the need to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”, while SDG 8 aims to “[P]romote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”.

The Preamble of “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”⁵

Inequality has featured in the discussion and formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since the very beginning and throughout the various iterations of the goals and targets.⁶ It is worthwhile noting some important distinctions when examining inequality, particularly whether or not the primary metric of examining inequality is income or some other measure. Another distinction is the issue of “horizontal inequality,” or inequality between culturally defined groups, to be contrasted with “vertical inequality,” or inequality between individuals. Much of the discussion of the former is centered on issues of conflict between groups, whereas the latter emerged as the much more common lens through which to view issues of inequality. A considerable part of the discussion of inequality in the SDGs actually concerns horizontal inequality, as there are many issues related to access and equal opportunity as well as a number of provisions against discrimination.

Also when discussing types of inequality, it is valuable to contrast between inequality of opportunity, and inequality of outcomes. What the development goals underline is that the starting conditions matter. Overall, there are strong interconnections between inequality of opportunity and inequality of outcome, but establishing equality of opportunity may be rather difficult if initial conditions are not taken into account.

When discussing inequality within the context of the SDGs, it is important to bear in mind an oft-used term: ‘inclusive,’ which appears in a number of areas. Broadly speaking, if something is inclusive, it implies a degree of coverage of all individuals. Therefore, the discussion of inclusive growth implies that the growth applies, more or less, to everyone. At the very least, inclusive is taken to imply a certain stance on growth that does not contribute to rising inequalities.

Another term that appears throughout the SDG Agenda and features prominently in a number of goals and targets is ‘access.’ The notion of access to resources, services or opportunities has been recognized for quite some time as an important part of discussions around inequality, both as a driver when access is lacking, and as an ameliorating force when access is granted. The SDGs adopt the view that improved access by the poor to public assets and services (especially in the education and health sectors) and income transfer programmes to sustain the poorest families, are essential to changing the structure of opportunities, and key to reducing the generational transmissions of poverty and inequality.

All of the needs identified through the ‘World We Want,’ together with inclusion and access, coincide with what many religiously inspired actors grapple with, and seek to serve. Many religious actors - whether motivated by theology, or by virtue of a long history and legacy of service in and to communities, or both - are the spaces wherein justice, peace and the struggle against inequality, interface. To use terminology coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), religious institutions and faith-based NGOs,

⁵ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld> - accessed September 5, 2017.

⁶ See “Inequality and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, in *Development Issues*, No. 4, 21 October 2015 http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wess/wess_dev_issues/dsp_policy_04.pdf (accessed 25 July, 2018).

are sites of *intersectionality*⁷ between belief, justice (as the counter struggle to all inequalities), and peace (or lack thereof).

Religious institutions, religious leaders (male and female), faith-affiliated and faith-inspired service delivery mechanisms, government-sponsored faith-based service partners, even government affiliated faith-based advocates, international FBOs with local offices, are all part of faith-based infrastructures, which are tightly interlinked within the so-called ‘communities.’ Appreciating this kaleidoscope of “religion” is necessary, and all of these are included in my definition of faith-based actors, or faith-based organizations (FBOs).

The fundamental teachings of all religions include concern for peace, endeavors for social justice and caring for the poor and marginalized. However these fundamental values are often taken for granted - at best articulated exclusively in human rights language - which does not appeal or inspire the masses in the same way. After all, over 100 million people go on religious pilgrimages every year - that bespeaks commitment, this is about what moves people.

As an indicator of the growing interest and appreciation within governmental, intergovernmental and civil society spaces, about the role(s) of religion referred to above, I would share an unprecedented meeting which took place, in early May 2014, between the senior-most leadership of the United Nations (over 50 of them), and representatives of the Vatican, together with His Holiness Pope Francis, on the SDG agenda. An audience followed this meeting between the UN Secretary-General and Pope Francis, who committed the Roman Catholic Church to support the SDG efforts.

This commitment from a leader of the world’s largest centralized Church - and one who is acknowledged today as a faith leader even by non-Catholics and indeed, by non-Christians - it must be noted, is to a set of goals, which are by no means convincing to many seasoned development experts. William Easterly for example, refers to them as “that *reductio ad absurdum* of global technocracy.”

In 2015, His Holiness Pope Francis published *Laudato Si*, the Second Encyclical, which created ripples within many secular developmental communities because of the degree to which, some maintained, it resonated strongly with the preamble and the conceptual framework of the SDGs themselves. Since then, His Holiness Pope Francis has spoken on several critical issues from migration to poverty to violence and climate change. In so doing, it can be argued that he has almost become the voice representing the faith leaders, worldwide.

So why should the confluence between the SDGs and religious values, and the affirmation of religious leaders of this global developmental agenda, matter? You may ask. Well, here are by now aspects, which form the mantra of justifications for “religion and development.”

A study, which was oft cited in the early part of the 2000s - albeit later heavily contested - published by the World Health Organization (WHO), alerted development practitioners to one of many subsequent reality checks for many of those working in the health field in particular. According to these studies, faith-based organizations (FBOs) provide an average of 30 to 40 percent of *basic health care* in the world. This figure is expected to be much higher in contexts where conflicts and/or humanitarian emergencies are active (e.g. Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria) where organizations such as IMA

⁷ Crenshaw, Kimberlé (1989). “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics” in *University of Chicago Legal Forum, Special Issue: Feminism in the Law: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, University of Chicago Law School, pp. 139–168.

World Health indeed inform us that almost 75 per cent of the basic health care can end up being provided by FBOs.

We also know that religious institutions are capable of significant social mobilization, in addition to **being seen to occupy** a distinct moral standing. I refer not only to the convening capacities inherent in raising and utilizing legions of volunteers (which no other institution can boast worldwide), but they are also owners of the longest standing and most enduring mechanisms of raising financial resources. In times where traditional 'secular' development is confronting its strongest set of resource challenges, these capabilities cannot be underestimated.

FBOs vary per religion, size, location, areas of interest, positions on diverse development-related issues and priorities, geopolitical positions, regional and national and local base of activities as well as interests - to name but a few. World Vision International's overall revenue was above \$2 billion in 2012 and World Vision US revenue alone, was just over \$1 billion. In the same year, the total group source of Islamic Relief was over £40 million Sterling Pounds - this is not counting the charity funds, which are nearly equal in amount - while Lutheran World Relief's total support and revenue was around \$38 million. None of these organizations compare to the Catholic Church's diverse assets. In 2012 *The Economist* conducted an investigation that estimated that the U.S. Catholic Church spends \$170 billion annually. Of that total, about \$150 billion was on Catholic hospitals and universities - which operate independent of religious authority - and about \$11 billion for parishes, plus a smaller amount for Catholic Charities.⁸

At the same time, from a significantly more impoverished perspective, in the words of Nigerian Sister Ngozi who oversees some orphanages and women's empowerment initiatives in rural Nigeria, "USD 100 can go a very long way to provide basic needs." The point is, FBOs vary, and the biggest among them can stand very tall indeed next to their secular developmental counterpart. The smallest of them, which may never feature in a mapping exercise conducted in metropolitan capitals or in a Western-based NGO, can very literally be involved in care for thousands of the world's poorest.

The social mobilization which faith actors are capable of can shift attitudes and behaviors, which are ultimately conducive to more sustainable development patterns. This potential becomes particularly relevant in current times, which are reminiscent of those preceding the Second World War. Humanity is confronted now with a similar series of critical choices as it was then. The political spectrum seems littered with extremist and nationalist ideologies, which create and build on fear of 'the other', while protagonists dehumanize and demonize those who disagree or who are just different with the oft-heard refrain "you are either with us or against us." Inequalities between rich and poor have never been higher in recorded human history, including in rich, so-called developed countries, and the depths of poverty reached are exacerbated by natural (and man-made) environmental disasters.

The fact is, that regardless of what some policy makers may maintain while they are in Brussels, New York, Geneva, Vienna or Washington, country offices/field missions of multilateral entities and most governments (both in conflict zones and outside thereof) are increasingly requesting guidance on how to engage with religious actors. There are thus "culture shifts" and ensuing tensions, which are taking place - particularly in the western hemisphere headquarters of secular institutions, whereby the importance of the role of religion, and an awareness of faith-based service provision during and after situations of armed conflict, are undeniably increasing. This heightened awareness is also engendering more requests for

⁸ See "The Catholic church in America - The working" - <https://www.economist.com/newsbook/2012/08/16/the-working> (accessed 29 July 2018), and "How Rich is the Catholic Church?" http://www.slate.com/articles/business/moneybox/2013/03/catholic_church_and_pope_francis_religious_institutions_are_exempted_from.html (accessed 29 July 2018).

targeted support - e.g. training of Foreign Service officers, and officials in multilateral entities on the nexus between religion, international relations and development.

Diverse faith-based representatives also speak to a similar “culture shift” taking place within many of their own organizations, where there is a gradual move away from outright condemnation of multilateral governmental entities, and more about compassion towards them and for their agendas. There has been “an advance” in finding common ground between secular human rights ethos and religious values, in organizational cultures, more generally.

Daniel Levine (2012) is one of many scholars on Latin America speaks to an evolutionary relationship between religion and politics. In his analysis, Levine notes three key trends including the diversification and pluralization of the religious landscape in the region, which are similar to what is occurring in other regions. The previous notion one church one state history, he notes, has been transformed in part through the adoption and utilization of novel media resources by certain religions. Another trend more visible in the Latin American context is one where religious groups are increasingly playing a major role in regional social movements, advocating for and supporting local democratic transitions and the protection of human rights. Their involvement in reconciliation processes, the creation of truth commissions, and the mitigation of escalating violence, argues Levine, provides examples of the new political roles adopted by these organizations. Crucially, as these groups look to the future, Levine anticipated that they would continue to seek out greater societal support in the face of decreasing political influence and an increasingly pluralistic environment. The experience of Brazil today and the election of President Jair Bolsonaro is a testament to the increasing political influence of certain religious actors, **which in turn, is jeopardizing the very pluralism, which nurtured it** – not unlike what is happening in the United States, with the election of President Donald J. Trump in November 2016.

Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely because of these trends, many in the UN and other governmental entities today, see value to engaging with religious actors. Numerous initiatives are mushrooming, which bring together governmental and faith-based entities to secure better partnerships and collaboration towards shared goals, and to sustain the value added of such engagements around shared goals. And the learning, which is taking place (as opposed to the literacy or the competency), is significant.

In fact, most development agencies, whether governmental or intergovernmental, have actually been engaging with religious leaders, and/or partnering with faith-based or faith-inspired NGOs, at some point or another, in the history of their outreach and program implementation. It is a myth to believe that the work of changing livelihoods, convincing people to abandon (harmful) practices or behaviors, or serving communities in need whether during peaceful or humanitarian crisis, has only been the business of secular-minded entities.

Yet, it seems that this particular kind of outreach - with religious actors - has only started to become ‘popular’, and in fact, *de rigeur*, in Western research and academia, as well as policy-making circles around development and humanitarian assistance. The fact that this sudden spurt of attention on ‘faith-based engagement’ happened after September 11, 2001, is, of course, entirely coincidental. Doubtless it is also entirely coincidental, that millions of dollars are being made available to amp up the “religion and peace” agenda globally, around the time the so-called Islamic State started controlling territories, burning and beheading people, and thereby impacting on the increasing ‘flood’ of immigrants to European shores. The latter, by the way, referred to as “a European migration crisis”, even though facts indicate that there are a thousand-fold more refugees in already overstretched developing countries such as Lebanon, Libya, Pakistan and Turkey, than ever crossed to the shores of Europe.

Given this interest in religion and/in development, not unlike previous standard practices in the colonial era, largely western governments and western-hemisphere based development institutions are rushing to find 'expertise' to advise them on the what, why, where and how of this realm of religion. Of course the search of expertise never really goes beyond the very same western shores. After all, 'real' knowledge of the world out there, really resides in Washington DC, New York, Berlin, London, Paris, Brussels, Rome, Amsterdam, Vienna, Geneva, Toronto, etc..

Surely there can be no 'real' understanding of who the main religious actors are, what they are doing, what they want in 'Africa,' or 'in the very same places where most of these 'religious actors' have existed and served their communities, and even integrated religious lexicon into their everyday language. Hence the efforts now in place to allocate most of the resources currently delineated to understand, work on and with religious actors, and build the capacities of these institutions - i.e., to faith-based and secular entities, who - again entirely by coincidence apparently - happen to be headquartered in the western hemisphere. Valuable and precious overseas development resources, goes the argument, have to be invested wisely - - i.e. right here in Europe and North America where 'our' faith-based partners are based. And before you dare to assume that there is anything problematic with that, the assurance is immediately forthcoming that these western-based NGOs, are all working in 'Africa,' and elsewhere in the big wide world, so presumably they really do know what it is all about.

APPRECIATING POSSIBILITIES AND PITFALLS IN THE RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT NEXUS

A common question that comes up in dialogues between secular and faith-based entities is "so what do faith-based entities actually do differently vis-à-vis development, humanitarian and/or international affairs?" Some FBOs carry out part of their work through engaging with sacred religious texts. This means the potential to change harmful discourse (speech and action), justified through religious terms, is realized when some religious protagonists themselves can be made to see alternative expressions of this faith, which support human rights, rather than decry or abuse them. Through this process of engagement with religious texts, some FBOs report an ability to shift community attitudes - such as the stigmatization of HIV and AIDS - and to argue against harmful practices justified through religious terms, such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

Faith-based and faith-inspired NGOs maintain that the work of development has always been the original domain of religious entities, and that in fact, the "intruders," or "new kids on the block" are the so-called secular organizations - read governments, and intergovernmental organizations, such as the UN. So many FBOs maintain that 'unique' approaches, or methodologies, are brought to development praxis, as a result of their work.

An example of faith-based engagement in Uganda, for instance, focused on the issue of criminalization of homosexuality in 2015. Rather than raise the issue from the angle of human rights implications per se - something secular institutions often do - a dialogue was generated between and within faith communities around the Biblical narrative of Jesus and the Ten Commandments ("did Jesus say to hate your neighbor if s/he was a homosexual?"). While national legislation has yet to change, the approach among some of the religious communities supporting the punitive anti-rights legislation, is now being questioned from within. There are other instances of countries where religious actors have played a key role in political contexts - e.g. Indonesia, when some religious organizations were behind the creation of broad based

movements for political mobilization. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that there are complex relationships between states and religions, including situations where certain states seek to co-opt religious leaders, institutions and/or religious groups, to justify legitimacy and guarantee community outreach.

So there is a need for critical distinctions to be made in discussions on the intersections between religion, security and freedom - as predicated by the overall governance context. While governance is a technocratic matter, it is also a question of values - something faith actors embody. This prompts the need for an important distinction between FBOs and the social, cultural and economic development work they do, and between religious leaders, some of whom do play political roles and/or are heavily vested in and with political governance.

Examples can be found in interfaith fora in Ethiopia and the Solomon Islands, where Imams and Pastors successfully work together, spearheaded by youth, on community interest issues, and as a result of their impact at the local level, some have become key negotiators with the duty bearers - i.e. the governments.⁹ Similarly, in several Latin American and sub-Saharan African countries, the track record of some FBOs in service delivery of basic needs at the community level, has prompted some governments to formally engage with them to complement their own services and outreach.

In addition to some obvious intersections of religion with conflict (e.g. the contexts of Syria, Iraq, Central African Republic, and Democratic Republic of Congo are not far from our minds), the linkages between stability and peace with sustainable consumption patterns and environmental implications, and related power dynamics and geopolitical considerations between the northern and southern hemispheres, are also part of these scenarios.

Some conflicts illustrate a clear link with issues of religious identity and are tied into the state's inability to honor their roles as duty bearers in general, and especially when it comes to issues of political and economic justice and social service provision. The context of Myanmar, it can be argued, is one where rather than ethnic and religious hatred between communities being a cause of violence, it is a consequence of the violence of social and economic injustice in a multiethnic country. Often diverse religious communities coexist peacefully, but the shortcomings of governments to provide - in an egalitarian manner - basic services to some communities, and to be held accountable for their deficiencies, stokes political violence, which erupts, and leads to religious hatred and strife.

Conflicts take on a religious garb but are not necessary about the religions themselves. Instead "they have profane causes, related to resources and other dynamics." Here the instance of Nigeria's Boko Haram can be cited. One could argue that religion is oftentimes noted as a cause of conflict, in a manner which increases "ambiguities" and disables the necessary clarity required about some of the 'root causes' of the descent into violence. The question, which is now posed, from the perspective of both secular and faith-based actors is: "how to promote inclusiveness, rather than polarizing tendencies, in society?"

The instances of engagement by FBOs in situations of conflict differ, but a comparative delineation and analysis of these situations can be hard for secular development actors to access. For instance, in spite of numerous studies on these issues, UN actors are, by and large, still seeking to assess, based on evidence, under what circumstances, how and with what impact do religious actors actually contribute to stability and peace in general and post-conflict; and, on the other hand, to violence and conflict?

⁹ One of the many biases of the human rights-centric discourses, is to focus on governments as the sole duty bearers. When in fact an argument is made for religious institutions themselves being a fundamental duty bearer of all human rights at all times.

In a *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment* the results of a two-year United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Africa study is presented on recruitment in the most prominent extremist groups. According to this first of its kind study by a UN developmental entity to examine the nexus of religion and development - deprivation and marginalization, underpinned by weak governance, are primary forces driving young Africans into violent extremism. Based on interviews with 495 voluntary recruits to extremist organizations such as Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram, the study also found that it is often perceived state violence or abuse of power and corruption that provides the final tipping point for the decision to join an extremist group.

The study reveals a picture of frustrated youth who are marginalized and neglected over the course of their lives starting in childhood. Faced with few economic prospects, even fewer, or fast shrinking avenues for meaningful civic participation to be able to bring about social transformation are the grim realities they find themselves in. And, crucially, with little trust in the state to either provide services or to respect human rights, the study suggests that such individuals “could, upon witnessing or experiencing perceived abuse of power by the state, be tipped over the edge into extremism.”¹⁰ The study then points to the nuanced role of religion as a motive or justification for extremism.

*The data shows that contrary to popular narratives, those who join extremist groups tend to have lower levels of religious or formal education and less understanding of the meaning of religious texts. Although more than half of respondents cited religion as a reason for joining an extremist group, 57 percent of respondents also admitted to understanding little to nothing of the religious texts or interpretations, or not reading religious texts at all. Indeed, the study suggests that actually understanding one's religion can strengthen resilience to the pull of extremism: among those interviewed, receiving at least six years of religious schooling was shown to reduce the likelihood of joining an extremist group by as much as 32 percent.*¹¹

Interestingly, the study calls on governments to reassess militarized responses to extremism, and recommends intervention at the local level, including through support to community-led initiatives aimed at social and cultural cohesion, and “amplifying the voices of local *religious leaders* who advocate tolerance and cohesiveness” {emphasis added}. The limitation to religious leadership is again striking here.

The results of the study are very much in alignment with three points, which emerged out of several policy discussions between the UN entities and faith-based partners – namely, the instrumentalization of religious identity in conflict situations; the ambiguity of the role of religion during times of conflict and therefore its potential as a destabilizing force; and yet the potential of religious actors as peacemakers, thus the capacity for some religious elements to provide solutions to conflicts.

The UNDP study begs the question of the role of international actors - including both bilateral donor governments, as well as multilateral entities (like donor governments and the UN, European Union, etc) in this particular nexus between religion, security and development. The approach of catalyzing the building of networks of religious leaders and other faith actors, who can be prevention-bulwarks and

¹⁰ UNDP Study released on September 7, 2017 - <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2017/09/07/vers-l-extremisme-violent-en-afrique.html> - accessed on September 20, 2017.

¹¹ Ibid.

peace and security maintenance systems, has become an increasingly popular practice among western governments and some intergovernmental organizations.¹²

This approach is itself predicated upon what some religious actors advised and recommended as a means of building on and deploying the social capital of religious leaders. Yet some of those who suggested such an approach also argued that engagement with religious actors would be valuable and productive to the extent that the social capital of religious actors can indeed be harnessed beyond mediation of certain conflicts, and towards active engagement in all aspects of recovery, reintegration, and human development. In other words, *selecting religious leaders only to work on select issues, without enabling an integration of the religious into broader civic efforts (a ‘whole of society approach’), aimed at comprehensive developmental engagement, is unwise. Instead, it is prudent that these engagements require outreach to and involvement with myriad FBOs delivering services in communities. These kinds of engagements would provide a means of securing interreligious cooperation and collaboration around the provision of critical basic needs, and thus enable a better outreach to more marginalized and vulnerable community members.* The strength of these very same religious actors is rooted in their social service to the communities, and the subsequent trust - and social capital - that such service nurtures, on multiple fronts.

Some religious actors argue that their experiences indicate that a sustained engagement around addressing critical needs (poverty, housing, health, education, sanitation, etc.) between secular and faith based actors in certain communities, could preempt the eruption of political violence. This they attribute to the fact that the collaboration towards provision of basic needs in any given context, allows for the *operationalization* of a faith-based discourse, which counters extremist narratives. In other words, as secular and faith-based development efforts are harnessed collaboratively, quality of life for all can be improved. In turn, the argument goes, this strengthens the visibility of a narrative of faith, which is collaborative and service oriented, rather than the ones designed to capture political power in order to address (perceived) injustices against any particular community.

At the same time, secular (and religious) actors are also challenged by the fact that all major religions have a tradition of justifying war through religious texts. Indeed, any value system can be - and has been - given to validate “just war” at diverse moments in history. Any value system is itself ambiguous, but what makes the realm of religious actors particularly ‘tricky’, is that many believe they often speak in the name of an absolute and incontrovertible - which is often hard to argue with.

FBOs therefore possess comparative advantages and are simultaneously confronted by certain limitations, when engaging with the governance agenda. Historically, religions have played strong political roles. After the severance of the link between Church and State, and with the independence of former colonies, some FBOs found themselves marginalized and displaced by new elites. This led to one of the now

¹² The UN Office for the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect (UNOPG) has provided unique leadership in building such “Networks of Religious Leaders and Religious Actors,” which have been convened in different regions and globally, and succeeded in developing a joint and comprehensive Plan of Action designed to prevent hate speech and atrocity crimes that could lead to Genocide. In May 2019, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres requested this office to develop a Global Plan of Action to combat hate speech. In a similar vein, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) launched a Faith for Rights initiative, which aims to unite diverse religious communities to counter discrimination and religious-based violence through a shared objective to promote human rights and to uphold the freedom of religion and belief. The UN Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC), are starting their outreach to religious leaders with a mandate from the UN Secretary-General to develop (yet another) Plan of Action for the Protection of Holy Sites. The first two initiatives have sought to work collaboratively with each other, but it is unlikely that the work of the UNAOC will follow suit.

unfortunately, forgotten lessons learned: that once religion engages with governance, it is bound, at some point, to grow weaker, and eventually to lose its foothold. Thus, the argument in some circles goes, that it is best to distance the institution and organization from government institutions and the praxis of governance, and to maintain a relatively silent position.

Engaging on governance and with governmental institutions requires being active - and more accountable - to myriad public domains, sometimes entailing self-serving scrutiny and critique. Most FBOs have, over the years, learned to be wary of opening themselves up to random criticism. However, when it comes to the creation and management of effective institutions (rooted in communities, able to mobilize resources from within and to manage social service delivery relatively well), FBOs successfully constitute local, national, regional and international networks. Many of these engage with myriad stakeholders at the same time. Thus, in fact, many FBOs offer themselves - and some are seen - as effective institutional partners. When it comes to modalities of implementation, many FBOs can boast strong capabilities and long standing partnerships, and many have well-developed skills and systems of monitoring and accountability.

Yet, when it comes to embracing a governance agenda, FBOs can be ill-used given the legitimizing potential they hold. This, in turn, can also put some of them in jeopardy - as with other civil society organizations. If and when secular civil society organizations shun FBO engagement (as has happened in some countries) then the opportunity that FBOs offer towards legitimizing development, foreign policy and human rights' initiatives, and enabling them to be successfully locally-owned, is dented.

The Central African Republic is an example of the 'double-edged sword' of religious involvement in conflict resolution. Many religious entities - whether religious institutions or faith-inspired NGOs - are often the first recourse for victims of the conflict. And yet when the religious conflict escalates, the very identity of an FBO becomes its liability. On the other hand, as experience in Tanzania illustrates, FBOs are critical deliverers of services to the poor, with some religious organizations claiming they provide an average of 40% of healthcare. In fact, because they are deeply rooted and well managed, some FBOs work in tandem with government, and successfully engage in public-private partnerships. Their experience also translates into an unparalleled database and knowledge capacities, identifying what people need, how best to serve some of the most marginalized, and how to leverage governmental interface to serve the most vulnerable.

"Cherry Picking Human Rights" and Related Dilemmas

Another complexity in the nexus of religion and development can be termed as "the selectivity of human rights." Within the UN system alone, there are instances where certain religious leaders are invited by some UN agencies, both positioning and highlighting their roles as critical agents of peace and champions of the green environment agenda for instance, and yet these very same leaders may hold relatively antagonistic - and publicly articulated - positions on women's rights. The question we grapple with, therefore, is whether this form of secular-religious engagement, ostensibly for the sake of "stability and peace especially in times of conflict" may in fact inadvertently also communicate that some rights are deemed more pertinent than others, at different times.

This selectivity, or cherry picking point invariably generates plentiful discussions and can polarize opinions. Many would agree that a certain flexibility and discernment need to be simultaneously used, when designing the outreach and partnerships between faith-based and secular actors. Some perspectives range between the need to balance the harm versus the benefits, or stick to the 'do no harm' principle. Yet others argue that each context (say humanitarian crisis) creates its own determinants (secure people's needs first, worry about who is doing so later) so there should be no unilateral decision. Yet another

perspective is that more secular-faith-based engagement will eventually result in negotiated solutions over the long-term to some of these human rights selectivity dilemmas.

Some faith-based actors appreciate that the UN is bound by the need to prioritize the universality of agreements reached at intergovernmental fora, but they will be quick to point out that as faith-based entities, they do not have to be overly concerned by international conventions. Rather, for FBOs, the priority is to listen, engage in dialogue, and deliver to those in need as guided by the Holy Scriptures. As such, concern for the diligence or heed paid to international human rights norms need not bother them or be an impediment. In short, it can be conceived as pedantic.

I cannot help but wonder however, at this: when the UN works with those who see some rights as more significant than others and these actors are invited as peers, they are given visibility, credibility and legitimacy. And when and if some of their positions can be considered hurtful, alienating and marginalizing of some sectors of society, does the UN not give those ideas legitimacy too?

The fact is, that the UN already does this, as an intergovernmental entity, with member governments whose track record on upholding human rights, are hard to defend. But why do so with civil society institutions, when their very plurality offers the opportunity to be selective to favor those predisposed towards adopting the human rights agenda in its entirety, thus agreeing to the universality, indivisibility and interdependency of these human rights?

IMPLICATIONS OF INCREASING “RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT”: Ambiguities, toolboxes

“[There is] too much focus on the impact of religion on man, and not enough on the impact of man on religion.” Amin Maalouf

It is now well over a decade since ‘religion and development’ became an acceptable and resourced area of engagement in international intergovernmental arenas. And the processes of mobilizing for joint advocacy, engaging in joint programmes, building of capacities (of some religious leaders, faith-based NGOs (FBOs) as well as some secular organizations themselves), is yielding some insights.

Many FBOs argue that strategic thinking about religion and development requires a transformational shift in the attitudes of secular development actors - from simple stakeholder analysis undertaken from a presumed position of secular predominance, to considerations of a level playing field, which is based on complementarity and parity between actors.

However this transformational shift entails realizing and contending with contradictory dynamics. On the one hand, religion should not have a special place at the table, since it is part of the societal fabric of faith, culture and values. On the other hand, to arrive at that awareness requires a certain level of religious literacy among all developmental actors. But if religious actors cannot make a claim to exceptionalism (i.e. to be distinguished from ‘civil society’ and ‘cultural dynamics’) then on what basis should they be sought out by the developmental technocrats? Further, how can processes of inclusion of religious actors who would shape the development agenda, be justified? And what would it then take to strengthen the moral imperative, which would in turn, inform a more robust strategy identifying the comparative advantages of some FBOs, and the best means by which these may be leveraged?

And yet what is potentially at stake here, may not be just a matter of including FBOs in development planning and roll-out efforts together with other NGOs, ***but a recognition of the fundamental role of religion, religious convictions, religious values as part of the cultural fabric of humanity, as an***

important variable in shaping development writ large. By logical extension therefore, the issue is not a matter of ‘secular’ organizations seeking to engage religious ones. Rather, religion should be a matter of concern for *all* developmental actors. In turn, FBOs should not be treated as a special or separate category. Rather, they must respond to the same quality criteria as any other civil society actor.

By urging for a consideration of the role that faith holds in shaping development, and by more systematic engagement of faith-based actors, there is an emerging pattern of mutual instrumentalization. “Rubber stamping what the UN believes to be a way to do things” is something most religious actors decry. At the same time, some UN entities are concerned that precisely because the religious actors hold such sway over behaviors and attitudes, religious leaders can counteract efforts, or indeed ‘use the legitimacy bestowed’ by appearing to be ‘accredited’ by the international policymakers, to further specific positions, which may not be in accordance with certain human rights - particularly around gender related human rights issues.

Enter the ambiguity of religion. This is why it is important to recognize both the potential and risks inherent in the relationship of religion to society. The very same possibilities and dangers, which are part and parcel of entertaining religious actors in social and political processes - indeed, in development as a whole. And this ambiguity has to inform all discussions on the issue. Religion pronounces on all aspects of life: dealing with money, material wealth, sexuality, power, and so on. As such, it has the potential to provide guidance in daily life and social coherence, and for solidarity, justice, peace, and non-violent resistance. At the same time, some religious organizations (whether religious institutions or even community groups) have their own internal power dynamics; may engage in questionable external outreach; claim absolute truth; and go so far as to instrumentalize religion to cultivate hatred, and justify acts of war and outright atrocities.

There are plentiful voices within the faith communities who argue that many religious leaders, and some FBOs, are not necessarily equipped, nor would they want to, play a prominent role in national governance matters. It is often noted that some religious institutions (e.g. the Catholic Church) have learned from diverse experiences, not to engage openly in politics. The “horrific outcomes” that result from religious leaders’ and religious groups’ involvements in political space is often pointed out to back those assertions.

A parallel concern - albeit a less popular one - is that religious institutions themselves are not the most democratic of spaces and can be replete with political - and financial - mismanagement, if not downright corruption. It is important to note that the fallout of these dynamics is not merely political. Rather, these kinds of vulnerabilities, or utter failures impact on the credibility of such religious institutions. In turn, this affects their inability to deal with issues of violence - within domestic spaces, within the institutions themselves, and certainly in the broader public and societal spaces.

On the other hand, while many FBOs are ill at ease challenging political order, and therefore tend to shy away from such engagement, the civil society space is shrinking in many countries, and attempting to “stay out of politics” is increasingly unrealistic as there is no middle ground. Not only that, but increasing political instability in some parts of the world has effectively encouraged a search for, and a resurgence of, more *faith-inspired* activism.

There is a rush to ‘mobilize religious actors’, but their complex and contradictory realities have to be factored into any and all such engagements. Neglecting these aspects of religion in development processes and world affairs is costly. As is acquiring a certain level of religious literacy on the part of development actors.

Some faith-based development actors can indeed contribute to achieving the SDGs and facilitating the changes required - as noted earlier. But the fact is, not all faith-based actors are well placed, or indeed able to do so. In fact, we would contend that there is no evidence to justify asserting that FBOs are better placed to understand local contexts, nor indeed to occupy the moral high ground, and enjoy the trust of civil servants - in spite of this being oft said. To successfully collaborate with FBOs, a careful analysis of their profile and background is required - including their own self-critical reflections. ***Beyond religious literacy therefore, I contend that what is required is a competency to deal with inter- and intra-religious sensibilities, and simultaneously with relational secular sensitivities, as a prerequisite to engagement with religions and with religious actors.***

Herein we come to other critical dimensions of the religion and development equation. There are, or should be, questions as to the identity and **representativity** of faith-based actors. Some of the ambiguities around 'religion' arise partly from the differences between rank and file of religious communities, and religious leaders. These entail ongoing questions as to which communities the traditional religious leaders are actually speaking for - themselves or their membership, and whom exactly among the vast numbers of the communities of faith?

This is particularly relevant given the difference between religious institutions - which are largely male dominated and rife with internal power dynamics - and between non-formal religious actors serving at the heart of their communities. With and to whom are we actually talking to when we are speaking with representatives of FBOs? Moreover, who is excluded from the dialogue and consultation tables? Further, to what extent is the outreach taking into consideration, or indeed contributing to, issues of asymmetries of power among religious groups and communities?

The ongoing engagement between secular and faith-based actors highlights complexities relevant to certain donor government perspectives. Some Arab donor governments, for instance, are heavily vested in developmental and humanitarian programmes within their own region. Naturally, these involvements impact on their level of comfort, so to speak, when it comes to discussions around the role of religion in governance, as well as on how their donor assistance may be conditional to furthering a specific vision or role of religious discourse, and on how disbursement of their development aid may be stipulated. For instance, some Arab governmental support - or resist - groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, underlining the cultural and political schisms in the Arab region, as well as the implicit sectarian tensions, which are at play. These issues raise an important question: what happens when some donors also have a political stake in the religious dynamics of governance in countries other than their own?

Western donor governments are quick to claim that their governmental assistance has less and less interest in impacting on governance of other countries. Instead, they would note that they are more concerned with attempting to support the creation of meaningful spaces for people to have a voice in their own broad governance process, to increase (or protect) "religious liberty," "freedom of religion and belief," (FORB) as a means of countering diminishing civil space. Given the so-called "migration crisis" and efforts to "prevent violent extremism" - the more politically correct term for the "war on terror" - many donors are now even more keen, it would seem, to leverage their development assistance towards better living standards - so that less people would consider migrating to their shores - or blowing themselves up along with hundreds of others.

Yet, as William Easterly notes,

The War on Terror had the effect of offering the War on Poverty additional funding in return for an alliance based on the unproven notion that fighting poverty would also fight terrorism. This alliance now looks like a bad bargain, both for Western humanitarians

*and for the world's poor. Mistaken accounts linking terrorism to poverty during the War on Terror supported negative stereotypes of poor people and particularly refugees; such allegations contributed in at least some way to today's resurgent xenophobia in the US and Europe. NGO and government aid leaders gave support—both rhetorical and financial—to Western dictatorial allies, sabotaging the promotion of democratic values worldwide (or even today at home)*¹³. {Emphasis added}

We need to ask the question here, whether - and to what extent - religious actors/FBOs are directly or indirectly, also contributing to supporting dictatorial regimes, which are sabotaging democratic values? For it should follow logically, that we cannot make a case for the unique value of religious actors' development work, and argue for the fact that religious institutions are also duty bearers of human rights, and quote the facts and figures about the extent of their social services and their capacities to effect social norm change. And at the same time, absolve them of any responsibility for the rise in xenophobia, religiously motivated violence, the continuing stigmatization of 'others' - whether women, LGBTQI communities, migrants, HIV positive people - to name but a few - and the cherry picking of human rights, which some religious institutions remain notorious for.

This cherry picking of human rights, coupled with an increasing preference by certain governments for promoting more direct partnerships with religious NGOs (in countries other than their own), rather than supporting multilaterals to scale up successful partnership initiatives for the SDGs/Agenda 2030, is cause for concern. What prompts governments to circumvent multilateral partnerships and aim for direct support to specific religious NGOs/FBOs? And does this not carry a danger that such efforts can be viewed as the new colonial enterprise in international development, and play into rising religious tensions globally? After all, history and contemporary evidence from Africa and Latin America, is replete with examples where mobilizing religious actors in other countries, no matter how well-intentioned, can also create some rather unholy alliances in opposition to gender related discourses.

In fact, this begs the question of the extent to which 'religion' and 'religious engagement' are increasingly perceived as an element in the toolbox of development and foreign policy praxis - i.e. a **transactional commodity**. This can take many forms. Including an increasing convening of FBOs as 'non traditional partners' to be hosted and feted around policy tables, building new NGOs and INGOs around 'religion' and 'religious engagement,' formulating business propositions around these themes, and now, increasingly, seeking to tap into the financial resource bases of some of these faith-based entities (largely well-endowed Islamic NGOs).¹⁴

However when 'religious engagement' can be part of a transactional approach, are there guarantees that the link to people's faith, and belief systems, will not be forgotten, overlooked, or worse still, appear to be abused? Here I borrow from Adam Shatz, when reflecting on Edward Said's Orientalism¹⁵. Shatz reminds us that one of the Orientalist myths is that religion is a uniquely determining force in the Arab-Islamic

¹³ William Easterly, The New York Review of Books, "The War on Terror vs. The War on Poverty" – November 24, 2016 - <http://www.nyudri.org/media-index/2016/terrorpovertynyrb>

¹⁴ See Azza Karam, "Religion and Development: An Enhanced Approach or a Transaction?" in IPS news service <http://www.ipsnews.net/2019/04/religion-development-enhanced-approach-transaction/> - 2019. Accessed May 12, 2019.

¹⁵ Adam Shatz, "'Orientalism,' Then and Now", The New York Review of Books, May 20, 2019 – <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/05/20/orientalism-then-and-now/> -- accessed May 30, 2019.

world. In a similar vein, I maintain that it is akin to an Orientalist myth to believe that religion is a uniquely determining force of development in 'the Other' parts of the world. The 'Other' here juxtaposed against the Western hemisphere. Shatz also goes on to quote Said saying "...*Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see [a particular reality] as human experience.*" If the "global war on terror" has taught us anything over the last seventeen years and more, it is that the road to barbarism begins with this failure" {emphasis mine}.

Indeed I further maintain that where and when religion is seen as a transactional commodity, an element in the toolbox of international geopolitics - be in development or foreign policy - we are failing to see religion as a human experience. As such, 'religions' should not be subject to what we do with tools, i.e. use them. Simply put, what is, fundamentally, people's faith, should not be a tool lending itself to use. Therefore, if and when we fail to appreciate religion as a human experience of faith, we will end up on the road to barbarism.

So where does that leave the nexus of religion and development?

Many FBOs continue to have troubling dimensions, which the largest among them have not dared to question. As such, FBOs cannot be exempt from any collateral damage caused by what NGOs (in)advertently end up contributing to, as Easterly rightly notes. *This is one of the many reasons why it is imperative that religious praxis in and for development is systematically measured against universal human rights principles and adherence thereto.* A great deal of time is spent on disputes pertaining to human rights, especially gender related rights. And in the last three years, a great deal of effort and resources, has been spent by both governments, and some religious institutions, on advocating for the role of religions in peacemaking, peacebuilding, sustainable development, saving the planet, doing better agriculture, welcoming the immigrant, and much more. Yet many of these initiatives stay conspicuously silent on the issues of women's empowerment and gender equality, which by now, should be unequivocally seen as a fundamental pillar of human dignity, even if some faith actors refute these inalienable human rights.

In fact, some international FBOs, by now well-courted and emboldened by several western and Gulf-based donor governments and policymakers, are taking the opportunity to stipulate thinly veiled conditionalities for partnership. Peacemaking, environmental stewardship, protection of children and minorities, are all 'good'. But gender, gender equality, gender identity, comprehensive sexuality education, reproductive health, reproductive rights, sexual rights, and/or family planning, are all no-go areas they are demanding the UN reconsider. The price for engagement on one set of issues with these partners, therefore, may well be the forgoing - or silencing - of the human rights - and dignity - of others.

There should be no question that the new development paradigm fit for the 21st Century, which appears on the brink of a third world war, should dare to challenge all prejudices, and should uphold all human rights for all, at all times. And, that these rights have to triumph over male dominated worldviews, praxis and traditions.

Perhaps what we should be most wary of therefore, are religiously inspired technocrats. Again I quote William Easterly in his understanding of technocrats, yet I expand it to reference certain religious actors:

[T]echnocrats have always shown little interest in fights over fundamental values. Their work proceeds from the assumption that everyone — or at least all the people who truly matter — already share the same enlightened commitment to democratic values. The only

*debate they are concerned about is over evidence on “what works” among policy inputs to produce the desired measurable outputs like higher wages...less poverty, less crime and terrorism, or less war.*¹⁶

Religious technocrats, therefore, who are prepared to compromise on certain human rights - i.e. what should be the fundamental values of sustainable development - can be complicit in the very same mechanisms, which perpetuate inequality and sustain disenfranchisement. This brings us back to what Amartya Sen emphasized as “*important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom. To counter the problems that we face, we have to see individual freedom as a social commitment.*”¹⁷ But religious technocrats have a long ways to go before they can see individual freedom as a social commitment. Instead, most will stay silent on any and all aspects of freedom, and all are prepared to stay silent - let alone commit themselves to, individual freedom.

I end by noting that it is *precisely because* of these contested domains, that religions, indeed culture as a whole, have to be at the heart of civic agency, negotiations, dialogue and partnerships, around and for sustainable development. Therefore, it is not whether religions matter to development or not - for they do. Nor is it a question of how religions matter. For clearly religious actors matter in multiple ways - so much so that there is even a religious inspired technocracy at play.

Rather, I maintain that the questions should be: which religious actors are prepared to uphold all human rights at all times? And which government and/or intergovernmental entity is prepared to work with those actors to secure the indivisibility, interrelatedness, as well as the inherent and inviolable character of human rights for all human beings with no exceptions – thereby strengthening civic spaces which can uphold and defend democratic values, in an age of unreason?

In Gratitude

These are the questions I wish to dedicate the bulk of my time as Professor of Religion and Development in this esteemed Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, to address, investigate, as well as seek to understand support the pursuit of. Which brings me to an important part of this paper. A long, deep and heartfelt expanse of gratitude. I wish to thank the Executive Board of the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam for enabling this precious space inside its institution to be set up. And in the same vein, I must thank ACT Alliance and ICCO for their strategic foresight, their determination to stand in solidarity with knowledge and evidence, and thus for walking the talk of honest and faith-inspired investigation of the roles of religion in development. All of which led to their sponsoring of this Chair.

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¹⁶ William Easterly, “Democracy Is Dying as Technocrats Watch: Assaults on democracy are working because our current political elites have no idea how to defend it” in *Foreign Policy*, December 23, 2016. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/23/democracy-is-dying-as-technocrats-watch/> - accessed on May 12, 2019

¹⁷ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/s/sen-development.html?mcubz=1> - accessed 20 May, 2018

I find myself humbled by, and grateful to, fellow Professors Caroliene Nevejan, Halleh Ghorashi and Jerzy Gawronski. The audience contains many who have inspired me, healed me, taught me, and stood in solidarity with me through thick and thin. I am grateful, deeply so, to all. In that vein, please also allow me to speak this truth: my interest in religion, my concern in dynamics of religion and development, and indeed my faith in faith itself, is inspired by my father, Mostafa Karam. And thus to him I owe the most basic and profound gratitude. Bearing his faithful mantle in ways both delightful and inspiring is my brother, Mohammed M. Karam. My attempt to defend faith from the instrumentalization, which I see happening with “religions”, is owed to my late mother, Rokayya Nafei, who always insisted I had to “protect faith”. And although to this day I wonder how it is, that this here short woman human can even think to defend the Almighty, I honor my mother’s memory by at least trying to understand the dynamics of faith in our lives, and being an irritant to those who would see it as a tool. My ability to continue to do any and all of this work is thanks to my life’s companion: Dr. P.L. de Silva.

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