

## Can Religion Contribute to Development? The Road from 'Truth' to 'Trust'

**Ruerd Ruben**

Professor of Development Effectiveness,  
Centre for International Development Issues (CIDIN), Radboud University Nijmegen  
R.Ruben@maw.ru.nl

---

### **Abstract**

Religion has played a rather ambivalent role in the study of development. This can partly be attributed to the common emphasis on its role for providing insurance and risk reduction. Current challenges for enhancing poverty alleviation in settings of civic conflict increasingly ask attention for social mediation and new identity building. Religion can then become a key driver for supporting bridging and linking networks. This requires, however, that epistemological attention shifts from the study of 'truth' to the understanding of 'trust'.

### **Keywords**

Development, Poverty, Conflict, Religion, Trust

### **Introduction**

There has always been a strong mutual interaction between the academic fields of mission studies and development studies, both in terms of their objects of study and in the shared underlying motivations for analyzing interactions between processes of exclusion and socio-economic change. Whereas the field of Mission Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands can already count on an academic trajectory of 80 years, the Centre of Development Studies (now CIDIN) is of more recent origin celebrating its 35 anniversary just three years ago. In this article we look back to this shared history and identify some upcoming issues for fruitful interdisciplinary interaction.

It cannot be denied that one of the basic foundations for development studies precisely lies in ethical concerns about persistent poverty and marginalization of poor countries and the exclusion of poor people upon decolonization. During the 1970s and early 1980s, under the influence of liberation theology,

mission studies provided important a justification for redistributive and participatory development strategies from the perspective of the poor and oppressed.<sup>1</sup> But gradually both disciplines have been growing apart in subsequent periods where secular views of growth-based development became the dominant discourse, and studies on the role of religion in development only received marginal attention in the work of some devoted anthropologists.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, however, new inspiration is drawn from more value-based approaches to development that acknowledge again the importance of human agency and culture in shaping their capabilities for overcoming poverty and exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Increased attention is given to the potential role of shared motivations, common identities and community networks as key drivers for socio-economic change. This also asks for a re-conceptualization of the interaction between ethical and material forces and the role of religion in supporting development and emancipation processes.

In this article<sup>4</sup> we provide some arguments for a more mature relationship between religion studies and development studies, based on new views of poverty that are based on the idea that high vulnerability to risk is the major cause of exclusion. Religion could offer significant protective devices against such risks, but more importantly might enable people to take risks and thus act as a real transformative force. The latter option requires collective action that is usually based on a set of 'shared identities' that provide a common 'sense of belonging'. Especially under conditions of (post)conflict and insecurity, there is emerging importance attached to religion as a constructive force for (re-)establishing trust at different levels of societal interaction (see special section 1).

*Special section 1: Conflicts where Religion and Development Meet*

After more than 50 years of slow and sometimes unsuccessful development, there is a growing recognition that socio-economic progress is not a smooth process but the result of immanent contradictions and emerging conflicts.<sup>5</sup> In such settings, strategies for overcoming poverty meet immense challenges for creating social cohesion amongst

<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, London: SCM Press 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System', in: M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London: Tavistock 1966, 1-46.

<sup>3</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999.

<sup>4</sup> The article was delivered as keynote speech at the 80th Anniversary of the Chair of Mission Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, November 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What can be Done about It*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007.

opposing fractions that can only be addressed through substantial in-depth investments in societal trust. Let me provide you with some typical examples from my own professional experience:

*Nicaragua: Land Reform under Guerilla Warfare*

During the 1980s, the Sandinist revolutionary regime promoted land redistribution towards poor and landless farmers as a strategy for creating a rural class of producers capable of producing food and export crops to sustain the economy and maintain stability in the countryside.<sup>6</sup> However, in the conflictive interior region of Nicaragua the organization and execution of land reform proved to be highly contested. Although land distribution towards the poor was envisaged as an inclusive strategy, it turned out that many families living in conflictive areas considered the land title provided by the Sandinist state as little legitimate. Active contra-revolutionary forces — supported by us funding — threatened the newly created land reform cooperatives with destruction. Consequently, most redistributed land was left idle. This changed substantially once the local churches took up a more active role in the process of handling over the land titles.<sup>7</sup> Apparently, the church is considered as a more permanent and reliable authority in the region and created the necessary trust for farmers to take possession of the newly acquired land.

*Rwanda: Reconciliation after Civil War*

The Rwandan genocide in the mid 1990s can be considered as the culmination of longstanding ethnic tensions between Tutsi and Hutu people contesting power and recognition. The conflict gave rise to a massive migration of people to neighbouring countries as well as to refugee flows towards European countries. After the political settlement of the conflict, new societal alliances had to be constituted. The government began implementing a participatory justice system, known as *Gacaca*, in order to address the cases of committed violence and to create new trust relationships. Since reference to ethnicity was formally prohibited, religion remained as one of the few sources for identity formation. On the other hand, the diaspora community faced major limitations in keeping up their role in the national reconciliation process, since they tend to maintain their 'old' identification.<sup>8</sup> Occasionally, the intermediation of the church provided migrant communities with new entrances to their societal network.

---

<sup>6</sup> Rued Ruben and Zvi Lerman, 'Why Nicaraguan Peasants stay in Agricultural Production Cooperatives?', *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 78 (2005), 31-48.

<sup>7</sup> See also: G.J. Huizer, 'Religion and the Struggle for land in Zimbabwe', in: G. Peperkamp and C.H.W. Remie (eds.), *The Struggle for Land World-wide*, Nijmegen Studies in Development and Cultural Change, 1, Saarbrücken: Breitenbach 1989, 87-107 for a similar experience on Zimbabwe.

<sup>8</sup> S. Franssen, K. Caarls and R. Ruben, 'Reconstruction and Reconciliation in Rwanda: The Role of Migratory Contacts and Remittances', *Journal of International Migration* 12 (2011) (in press).

Both examples illustrate that under conflict-prone conditions national or civil identities are usually not sufficient for enhancing social cohesive relationships, whereas reliance on religious values can provide a possible pathway for creating new and shared identities.

### Changing Views on Poverty

Traditional views on poverty have been mainly focused on low level of income or lack of material resources as major underlying causes for poor people being unable to satisfy their minimum living requirements. This conceptualization is strongly influenced by modernization theories that consider income generation and employment as keys towards poverty alleviation. The World Bank approach to poverty measurement based on the 'one dollar a day' standard is illustrative for this way of thinking. Similarly, the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are also largely based on such criteria of income and wealth creation.

A major shift in the conceptualization of poverty occurred with the recognition that subjective dimensions of income and wealth are equally important for people to 'feel' exempt from poverty. Consequently, subjective standards of welfare based on multidimensional concepts of poverty received major attention.<sup>9</sup> In addition to income dimensions of poverty, also non-income components related to education, health and access to markets and institutions were included into a more general definition of human wellbeing, or even happiness.<sup>10</sup> Further refinements have been introduced by defining poverty also in a relational way, recognizing the importance of differences in power and unequal distribution of wealth for individual wellbeing.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, exclusion from social networks is increasingly recognized as a major threat to poverty.<sup>12</sup>

Major progress in the conceptualization of poverty has been reached through a better understanding of the relationship between income poverty and assets.

---

<sup>9</sup> E. Diener, E.M. Suh, R.E. Lucas, and H.L. Smith, 'Subjective Well-Being: Three Decades of Progress', *Psychological Bulletin* 125/2 (1999), 276-302; N. Kakwani and J. Silber, 'Multidimensional Poverty Analysis: Conceptual Issues, Empirical Illustrations and Policy Implications', *World Development* 36/6 (2008), 987-1134.

<sup>10</sup> J. Schimmel, 'Development as Happiness: The Subjective Perception of Happiness and undp's Analysis of Poverty, Wealth and Development', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 10/1 (2009), 93-111.

<sup>11</sup> A. Mosse, 'A Relational Approach to Durable Poverty, Inequality and Power'. *Journal of Development Studies* 46/7 (2010), 1156-1178.

<sup>12</sup> B. Jordan, *A Theory of Poverty and Social Exclusion*. Cambridge: Blackwell 1996.

Chronic poverty is understood as the structural absence of assets that poor people need to defend themselves against unexpected income shortfalls.<sup>13</sup> It proves to be related to the occurrence of idiosyncratic shocks, like illness, death, loss of work, fire or theft. Such life events keep poor people trapped in low-return activities. Poverty is thus almost synonymous to 'vulnerability' and effective poverty reduction strategies should therefore devote major attention to the creation of suitable options that permit people's insurance against such pervasive risks.<sup>14</sup>

### Religion and Development

In the debate about poverty and development, the role of religion has been frequently contested. Different paradigms that played a leading role in development thinking usually maintained a rather ambivalent position vis-à-vis religion and faith, recognizing on one hand its role in individual people's lives and its contributions to welfare provision and charity, but on the other hand maintaining careful distance for including religion into political strategies towards poverty reduction.<sup>15</sup> Generally speaking, religion remained largely instrumental to development, whereas its intrinsic values are overlooked.

In the early years of development studies, the major paradigm was based on modernization theory that has been subsequently expanded with 'basic needs' and 'political economy' thinking. While attention was very much focused on the leading function of the state in steering development processes, the role of religion became marginalized to the personal domain. As an illustration, Beek, in his review of 15 years of publications in the most prominent journal 'World Development' during the 1982-98 period, found rare references to the role of religion and detected only five articles focused on religion (compared to more than 80 articles dealing with gender issues and the environment).<sup>16</sup>

Some appreciation for the role of spirituality in development was raised in the 1990s, starting with the World Bank recollection of narratives in the 'Voice

---

<sup>13</sup> C. Barrett and J. McPeak, 'Poverty, Inequality and Development', *Economic Studies in Inequality, Social Exclusion and Well-Being* 1 (2006), 131-154.

<sup>14</sup> J. Morduch, 'Poverty and Vulnerability', *The American Economic Review* 84/2 (1994), 221-225.

<sup>15</sup> C.K. Wilber and K.P. Jameson, 'Religious Values and Social Limits to Development', *World Development* 8 (1980), 467-479.

<sup>16</sup> K.A.V. Beek, 'Spirituality: A Development Taboo', in: D. Eade (ed.), 'Development and Culture', *Development in Practice* 10/1 (2000), 31-43.

of the Poor' program,<sup>17</sup> bringing together the experiences of over 60,000 poor women and men from participatory poverty assessment conducted in 50 countries. The conceptual work by Amartya Sen<sup>18</sup> further elaborated on the critical role of human capabilities for overcoming poverty and deprivation. At analytical level, the concept of poverty was substantially extended towards a broader understanding of multidimensional 'well-being' and has been further operationalized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with the measurement of human development index (published annually since 1990).

In more recent years, however, the position of religion in development became marginalized again, particularly with the stronger policy reliance on forces of market liberalization, privatization and deregulation.<sup>19</sup> While these development strategies make the normative claim that faith belongs to the individual domain and that state and market should be kept separated, the study of religious discourse and practice is basically considered as part of the cultural institutions associated with class, ethnicity or social practices.

The 'resistance' of development studies against religion can be attributed to different views on the role of development and the character of the development process. Traditional approaches consider religion mostly as a protective device, providing people with a kind of insurance against risk. This inward-looking view of religion basically considers its importance for self protection, creating internal spaces for mitigating adverse events, but usually at the cost of staying poor forever.<sup>20</sup>

Far less attention is usually given to the alternative view on religion as a potential driving force for overcoming poverty, enabling people to take risk and to confront the immanent conflicts forthcoming from social change. Such outward-looking approaches tend to harness people to actively involve themselves into promising pathways out of poverty.<sup>21</sup> It considers religion as a (pooled) investment that extends substantially beyond the individual sphere

---

<sup>17</sup> Deepa Narayan with Raj Patel, Kai Schafft, Anne Rademacher and Sarah Koch-Schulte, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?*, New York: Published for the World Bank by Oxford University Press 2000.

<sup>18</sup> See note 3.

<sup>19</sup> S. Deneulin and C. Rakodi, 'Revisiting Religion: Development Studies Thirty Years on', *World Development* 39/1 (2010), 45-54.

<sup>20</sup> This usually involves adjusting aspirations *downwards* to reflect disadvantaged circumstances and hardship adjusting aspirations 'to what is seen as possible'.

<sup>21</sup> This involves adjusting aspirations *upwards* to reflect new opportunities and what others have managed to achieve.

and thus enables people to take appropriate risks that are associated with closer involvement in development.

### Conflict and Trust

The current stage of development is sharply marked by a strong increase in violent conflicts, mostly originating from struggles regarding the control of resources and power. Many of these new conflicts in the global South are based on civic confrontation between societal fractions that intend to maintain exclusive domination.<sup>22</sup> As a consequence, a large part of human displacements and international migration can be explained by the lack of proper governance structures that permit mediation between opposing interests.<sup>23</sup>

In his analysis of the root causes of current social conflicts, Azar outlines four major conditions that influence the process dynamics of most civic conflicts. While the deprivation of rights and the failure of governance system are usually acknowledged as key elements for the emergence of social conflicts, the development of (inter)national network linkages and the creation of a new common and shared identity are considered as vital components for peace-building and reconciliation.<sup>24</sup>

This is further elaborated in recent work of Elinor Ostrom — the 2009 Nobel laureate in Economic Sciences — on the role of trust for building coherent communities and the importance of identity for social cohesion. Her analysis considers self-regulation through internal transparency and community exchange based on reciprocity as critical mediating devices for overcoming conflicts. Investments made in the creation of mutual trust are required to address collective action problems. In addition to material incentives, social values of trust and trustworthiness are required in order to enable communities to develop confidence in loyalty of other agents. In this context, religious values play an important role, since they can provide moral imperative for people to become engaged into shared commitments.<sup>25</sup> This is, however, only

---

<sup>22</sup> H. Hegre and N. Sambanis, 'Sensitivity Analysis of Empirical Results on Civil War Onset', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50/4 (2006), 508-536.

<sup>23</sup> N. van Hear, *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*, London: ucl Press Limited 1998.

<sup>24</sup> E. Azar, *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases*. Aldershot: Dartmouth 1990.

<sup>25</sup> E. Ostrom and J. Walker, *Trust and Reciprocity: Interdisciplinary Lessons from Experimental Research*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation 2003. 409 pp.

possible if religion contributes to outward-looking cooperative attitudes and enables an open participation of outsiders in the social exchange process.<sup>26</sup>

### Key Religion-Development Interfaces

Given the critical importance of creating trust for overcoming civic conflicts, we can consider different attributes of religion in the development process. Following the distinction made by Putnam,<sup>27</sup> social values and relationships can constitute either *bonding* ties, *bridging* networks or *linkages* amongst (groups) of people. Bonding ties are based on homogeneous values that permit internal exchange and offer local protection against outsiders. Bridging networks are more externally oriented and permit regional cooperation and exchange amongst heterogeneous groups based on reciprocity. Finally, linking is strongly oriented towards the capacity to leverage resources and information from people beyond the community, recognizing that different social strata maintain a hierarchy where power, social status and wealth are accessed by different groups.<sup>28</sup>

At the interface between religion and development, similar binding, bridging and linking networks can be distinguished. At the local level, faith-based institutions play a critical role in providing communities access to basic services. Missionary churches and NGOs proved to be highly efficient development brokers, still delivering up to 40% of basic health care provision in large parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Their closeness to poor households in remote communities, their long-term relationships with the civic cause and strong identification with the demands of the poor make faith-based organizations highly reliable partners for grassroots-oriented development cooperation.<sup>29</sup>

At a more regional level, advocacy by religious organizations and councils of churches plays an important role in claiming access to civic institutions and participation in decision-making processes. Churches are well-known for their leading position in the struggle for the protection of human rights and the

<sup>26</sup> R. Sosis, 'Does Religion Promote Trust? The Role of Signalling, Reputation, and Punishment', *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 1/7 (2005), article 10.

<sup>27</sup> R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster 2000.

<sup>28</sup> M. Woolcock, 'The Place of Social Capital in Understanding Social and Economic Outcomes', *Canadian Journal of Policy Research* 2/1 (2001), 11-17.

<sup>29</sup> G. Huizer, 'Evaluating Community Development at the Grassroots: Some Observations on Methodology', *America Indigena* 25/3 (1965), 279-301.



maintenance of basic freedoms, representing an important space for civic representation between public and private interests.

Finally, a challenging new space for religion has been opened up in the process of reconciliation and reconstruction after civic conflict.<sup>30</sup> Given the distrust in state-led institutions in many post-conflict settings, religious organizations assume a leading role in the establishment of transitional justice. This is particularly the case in settings where national reconciliation asks for restorative justice based on public accountability of committed crimes as a means for restoring mutual relationships.<sup>31</sup> A special role is also available for religion as a linking pin with the diaspora community abroad, which is of vital importance for mobilizing resources to support reconstruction efforts. This diaspora can enable trust-building efforts between formerly opposing groups, contributing to more open and forward-looking networks that create positive pay-offs to reconciliation efforts.<sup>32</sup>

### Outlook: from 'Truth' to 'Trust'

The study of religion and development could probably benefit from a more interactive approach when attention is focused on conceptual interfaces that explain the dynamics of social change. It may therefore also be required to conduct a new reading of some theological concepts, enabling a deeper understanding of their original meaning and significance. The potential for religion to contribute to building societal trust can be considered as a new challenge for bridging the current divide.

This sometimes requires, however, also an epistemological reorientation, including the fundamental re-thinking of key theological concepts. A typical example is derived from the New Testament, where the Greek word *'Pis'-tis'* appears with a dual meaning: it is sometimes translated fairly straightforward as 'Faith' or 'Truth', whereas at other occasions it is referred to as 'Trust'.<sup>33</sup> The current focus in the discussion on the role of religion is mostly related to its

<sup>30</sup> J.D. Gort, H. Jansen and H.M. Vroom (eds.), *Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation*, Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi 2002, 405 pp.

<sup>31</sup> R.G. Helmick and R.L. Petersen (eds.), *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation*, Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press 2002, 455 pp.

<sup>32</sup> L.A. Young and R. Park, 'Engaging Diasporas in Truth Commissions: Lessons from the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission Diaspora Project', *International Journal on Transitional Justice* 3/3 (2009), 341-361.

<sup>33</sup> J.H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon to the New Testament*, 1983, downloadable at website *StudyLight.org*, <http://www.studylight.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=4102>.

dogmatic dimension, thus giving implicit prevalence to the 'truth' dimension of belief. However, another meaning of religion as 'trust' and the attributes of 'trustworthiness' encourages us to devote more serious attention to the emotional linkages between people, their identity-seeking behaviour and the key role of shared partnership relationships.

This latter interpretation provides challenging options for innovative research at the interface of development studies and mission studies. We can envision at least three promising areas that could benefit from further research collaboration. First, in order to advance the conceptualization of multidimensional poverty, the mutual interactions between material and spiritual well-being need to be better understood. Second, for strengthening the understanding of the role of religion in development processes, the heterogeneity in religious beliefs and practices deserves to be analyzed, giving particular attention to the inherent tensions between protective and transformative devices. Third, a further study of the importance and significance of the trust as a driving force towards risk management and reconciliation might offer promising perspectives for a new appreciation of the role of religion in development.

**Ruurd Ruben** (b. 1954) is Professor in Development Effectiveness at the Centre for International Development Issues (CDIN) at the Radboud University Nijmegen and Director Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. He studied development economics at Free University Amsterdam and lived and worked for more than a decade in rural development programs in Central America. Hereafter, he was appointed at Wageningen University to conduct studies on sustainable land use and food security in sub-Saharan Africa. He published extensively on issues of cooperative development, land reform, and the impact of fair trade. His email address is [R.Ruben@maw.ru.nl](mailto:R.Ruben@maw.ru.nl).