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Religion and Development: Alternative Visions, Credibility, and Networks as Religious Assets for Sustainable Development?

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Abstract: Religious organizations have become crucial actors in international development. However, scholarly discussions have largely ignored the dynamics that shape their impact on the ground. This article examines these dynamics by assessing three claims about the specific developmental assets of religious organizations: (a) their credibility in the eyes of their beneficiaries; (b) their control over far-flung social networks; and (c) the idea that religious organizations pursue alternative visions of development. Drawing on existing research, we study these claims in two development sectors: healthcare and environmental sustainability. The results complicate linear narratives of the positive impact of religions on development. Dynamics internal to the religious field sometimes lead to practices that run counter to the Sustainable Development Goals, while institutional pressures in the field of international development push religious organizations to become more similar to their secular counterparts. We suggest the need for alternative frameworks that go beyond prevailing secularization and de-secularization narratives to pay attention to the institutional field dynamics that shape religious development initiatives.

Key words: Religion, AIDS, healthcare, environment, Sub-Saharan Africa, climate change

I. Introduction

Over the last 20 years, social scientists have engaged in discussions about the nexus between religion and development (Baumgart-Ochse and Wolf, 2019; Bompani, 2019; Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011; Haynes, 2014; Lunn, 2009). Much of this debate has centred on the policy implications of engaging faith-based organizations in development, as well as on the political and normative implications of such engagements. Departing from this focus, we suggest that it is imperative to explore the ways in which the development activities of religious organizations are played out on the ground.

In this article, we pursue this goal by assessing three particular claims on which the outstanding value of religious development work and the comparative advantages of faith-based organizations rely: (a) their credibility in the eyes of their beneficiaries; (b) their command of far-flung social networks, infrastructure and access to hard-to-reach populations; and (c) the idea that religious organizations pursue alternative visions of development. Assessing these claims,

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we focus on two central development fields: healthcare and environmental sustainability. While environmental sustainability is linked to several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, good health and well-being are expressly mentioned in SDG 3.

Our analysis shows that the more faith-based organizations (FBOs) become integrated into the apparatuses of international development, the more similar they become to their secular counterparts. At the same time, dynamics internal to the religious field sometimes undermine religious organizations' credibility, negatively affecting their trust and legitimacy. Conceptually, we also interrogate the claim that the increasing involvement of religious organizations in development is part of de-secularization processes. De-secularization narratives and the rejection of secularization theory have become dominant perspectives in research about religion and development. However, in many European donor countries, the increasing turn towards development reflects churches' strategies in claiming social and political relevance against the backdrop of the accelerating decline in church attendance. In aid-receiving societies, by contrast, the projects of FBOs are often remarkably similar to secular ones. Both findings highlight the need to go beyond the dichotomy between secularization and de-secularization. We suggest that alternative theoretical frameworks should conceptualize the increasing engagement of religious organizations in different social settings (e.g., international development, the public sphere and the religious field). One such framework is field theory, which considers how the institutional pressures of different settings shape the development activities of religious organizations.

Scholars sometimes use the terms 'religious development NGOs' and 'FBOs' interchangeably (for different definitions, see Clarke and Ware, 2015). However, FBOs is a general term that encompasses various types of religious organizations, of which the religious development NGO is just one (James, 2009). Accordingly, we employ FBOs as a collective term for different types of organizations that relate to one (or several) religion(s). These include religious umbrella organizations (e.g., the Lutheran World Federation), congregations (e.g., the local Catholic church in a city district), religious development NGOs (e.g., Islamic Relief, Worldvision), and other faith-based organizations (e.g., Muslim school, Jewish hospital). Moreover, we use the term 'religious leaders' to refer to global or national leaders (often heads of the umbrella organizations just mentioned) and specify it if we use the term for local leaders (e.g., the head of a local congregation).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the next section, we discuss in what ways religion has come to prominence in development debates and describe the three claims concerning its development potential, listed above. After this, we describe the field approach that guides our analysis and analyse the aforementioned claims in relation to two development areas: healthcare and environmental sustainability. Based on this analysis, in the concluding section, we deliberate on different interpretations of the findings and present a reading based on field theory.

II. Religion and Development

Over the last 20 years, scholars have been fascinated by questions regarding how religious worldviews, organizations and practices contribute to the processes of development. There are good reasons for this. As classical studies such as those of Max Weber (2013 [1904/1905]) have shown, religious traditions have exerted major influences on economic orientations and the rise of markets. In particular, the rise of distinct forms of inner-worldly asceticism has been found to champion deep-running transformations of society (Bellah and Joas, 2012; Eisenstadt, 1986). At the same time, poverty and social inequalities have been exacerbated through the advances of capitalism and the gradual 'disembedding' of market-based

relations (Polanyi, 1944) of economies from the time-honoured forms of reciprocity found in religious gift economies. In addition, virtually all religious traditions in human history have developed forms of healing, healthcare and medicine targeting both physical and mental health. Finally, religious worldviews and ethics shape perceptions of and human relationships with the natural environment, thereby facilitating both environmental care and environmental exploitation (White, 1967).

Two fundamental shifts in scholarship have given new prominence to these lines of thinking: the so-called postsecular turn in the study of religion, and postcolonial critiques of development thinking. Caught up in the notion of secularization, many scholars assumed that, as modernization proceeded, religion would become increasingly privatized, individualized and compartmentalized as a separate institutional domain (Dobbelaere, 2002). However, new forms of public religion (Casanova, 1994) and collective religious resurgences (Juergensmeyer, 1993) have severely challenged these assumptions. At the same time, the ongoing relevance of religious beliefs in the Global South suggested that secularization has neither been linear nor universal, thus exposing the inherent West-centrism in social-science scholarship (Berger, 1999). Post-colonial critiques of secularization struck a powerful chord with critical scholarship in development studies that drew attention to the ways in which religion had been ignored as a vital force not only in academic studies, but also in development organizations (Deneulin and Bano, 2009).

During earlier development decades, religion had indeed played only a marginal role in state-led efforts to improve living conditions in the Global South. Overall, religion was seen as an obstacle to economic growth (Berger, 1999). The dominant idea in recent scholarship is that, in this context, secularism was a hegemonic knowledge regime that served to delegitimize and largely ignore positive religious contributions to development. While, under the aegis of secularism, religion seemed particularistic, irrational and backward in the eyes of its critics, such views now appear hasty and undemocratic. Deneulin and Rakodi (Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011: 46) suggested in an influential article that 'because religion deeply influences people's constructions of meanings about the world, development studies need to engage with believers' interpretations of social, economic, and political reality in the light of their faith'.

This interrogation of religion was paralleled by a critical engagement with notions of development. Two strands are central here. First, disappointed by the performance of postcolonial states, neoliberals launched influential critiques of state intervention, leading to an emphasis on civil society. Driven by a belief in the self-organizing potential of non-state actors (Neubert, 1997; Peters et al., 2009), Western donors began to promote NGOs as the new spearheads of processes of democratization and empowerment. Significantly, this created new public roles for religious actors in transnational development circles (Haynes, 2007; Hearn, 2002).

Second, animated by critical reflections on colonial legacies and continuities, proponents of the post-development approach criticized the development paradigm as inimical to the interests of third-world populations and foregrounded the ways in which this served to mask global power structures and the ongoing exploitation of non-industrialized countries (Escobar, 1998; Pieterse, 1998). Importantly, as post-development advocates chiefly targeted development as a neo-colonial knowledge regime, they also opened up avenues for alternative, religious and spiritual forms of knowledge to be included in in the pursuit of social inclusion.

Shifts in both public and academic debates facilitated far-reaching changes in development policy. In 2000, the World Bank established a unit for a 'Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics' in which religious leaders played important roles (Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011: 45). Subsequently, many donor agencies and governments began programmes involving

FBOs, inviting them to become 'partners in development' (Belshaw et al., 2001). Research has shown that this has led to unprecedented levels of religious involvement in the institutional apparatuses of transnational governmentality (Baumgart-Ochse and Wolf, 2019; Ferguson, 2006; Haynes, 2014; Smith, 2017: 65). Religious NGOs have emerged as the institutional form in which religious communities have adapted to the infrastructure and demands of global development networks and to the new opportunities for organizational growth they offer. Significantly, this is often taken as evidence of de-secularization (Berger, 1999).

Reviewing the literature, we can identify three recurrent claims that justify the increasing religious involvement in international development. *First*, religious leaders and organizations are assumed to command greater legitimacy, trust and 'ethical standing' (Lipsky, 2011: 26). In the eyes of local populations, religious leaders and organizations are thus more credible agents of development than state bureaucracies, which are often seen as corrupt, or than secular organizations that do not share their religious commitments (Heist and Cnaan, 2016: 4; Lunn, 2009: 944). *Second*, because of their connections to congregational life, religious organizations are usually thought of as having command of greater and wider networks, especially in remote rural areas and among hard-to-reach populations (Berger, 2003: 20, 35; Green, 2003; Lunn, 2009: 944; Smith, 2017: 68). Lipsky suggests that 'FBOs are appealing partners for international development agencies (…) because their people and their infrastructure can be found in almost all communities around the world' (Lipsky, 2011: 26). Similarly, Berger states: 'Through their connections to extensive networks of believers (…) RNGOs [religious NGOs] embody the means through which to reach and mobilize significant portions of the world's population' (Berger, 2003: 35–36). Construed as social capital that mediates the provision of collective goods (Cnaan et al., 1999; Putnam, 2000; Swart, 2006), these networks are, among other things, seen as facilitating access to large pools of volunteers, whose services enhance development processes. *Third*, religious traditions are hailed as sources of *alternative* visions of development, visions that depart from the narrow focus on material betterment (Bradley, 2009; James, 2009: 8; Lunn, 2009: 945). Instead, 'FBOs have been said to encourage more holistic development, understanding the significance of spiritual growth and personal dignity' (Bompani, 2019: 176).

Smith (2017: 68) has offered a cogent critique of research that focuses one-sidedly on the comparative advantages of FBOs over secular development organizations. He suggests that such questions instrumentalize FBOs, which, like all organizations, have wider aims than just meeting development goals (see also Jones and Petersen, 2011). While we remain agnostic on whether 'the question of comparative advantage is unanswerable' (Smith, 2017: 68), we propose that there is value in scrutinizing the dynamics that unfold when FBOs become involved in development and to explore what these dynamics tell us about the claims mentioned above. As will become clear below, our aim is not to deny that in many parts of the world and fields of development FBOs do have advantages and capitalize on them, but to provide a nuanced picture of the complex social dynamics that FBO involvement calls forth when they do not.

III. Understanding the Role of Religion in Development Through Field Theory

We propose to study the development activities of religious organizations through the lenses of sociological field theory. Field theory allows us to understand the challenges that FBOs experience when they seek to employ the resources mentioned above (i.e., alternative visions, networks, credibility). It explains these challenges by highlighting that FBOs move between different social fields and face pressures to adapt their actions to the competing institutional logics of these fields.

Fields are social arenas that evolve their own social dynamics. Fligstein and McAdam (2011: 3)

describe fields as 'meso-level social orders where actors engage under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), and the field's rules'. Institutions guide the activities of actors by defining what actions are regarded as appropriate in the given field. These institutions can assume the form of rules, unwritten norms and expectations. Exercising pressure on actors, institutions generate operational logics that structure the activity in the field, often engendering similar behavioural patterns among actors (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Sectoral fields, such as politics, the economy, mass media, and religion, have each evolved their own institutions, such that the diverging institutional logics create boundaries between the different fields. Behavioural patterns that match one field are unlikely to match the standards of another field. The differences between sectoral fields become apparent in distinct sets of values, objectives (e.g., economic profit, academic truth, electoral votes), professional standards and jargon.

Religious development work moves across the boundaries of different sectoral fields, including the religious field, the field of international development, the public sphere, and the specific field of the given development activity (e.g., healthcare, education, environmental protection) (Koehrsen and Heuser, 2020). Each of these settings generates particular institutional pressures on FBOs and their assumed development assets. Facing divergent institutional pressures, FBOs navigate between conflicting expectations. This affects the extent to which these organizations can employ their resources. For instance, when FBOs adapt to the field of international development, they may compromise their specific religious resources: they may divert from their original religious visions, thereby losing religious credibility and believers' local support. Field theory suggests that the diverging field logics affect FBOs' potential to mobilize the resources attributed to them.

In the following, we focus on contrasting examples of religious engagement in two development sectors: healthcare and environmental sustainability. In the healthcare sector, FBOs are established development agents due to a long history of involvement. By contrast, religious engagement in environmental sustainability is more recent, and environmental activities are often undertaken by religious umbrella organizations and their local congregations.

Methodologically, our research proceeded in three steps: through ethnographic and interview-based, qualitative research in South Africa, Mozambique, Germany and Switzerland, we first established the contrasts and discrepancies between the much-repeated tenets about religion and development in policy discussions and the empirical realities of faith-based development on the ground and identified the major points of divergence. In a second step, we contrasted and compared our findings with major studies in the field. These comparisons highlighted the institutional dimensions and allowed us to formulate hypotheses about the institutional dynamics that drive FBO activities in development and shape their outcomes. Finally, in order to account for these dynamics and for the contrast between policy discussions and empirical findings, we drew on field theory.

Healthcare

Given the longstanding engagement of religious communities in caring for the sick, healthcare is an especially valuable field for studying the interplay between religion and development. This is particularly true for Africa, where Islamic and Christian hospitals were historically among the first to provide modern health services, which is why much of the discussion here is focused on African societies.

Many studies demonstrate the crucial role that FBOs play in African healthcare systems. These include faith-based healthcare facilities (hospitals and clinics), faith-based civil-society organizations, larger religious-based health networks and congregations. It is estimated that between 30% and 70% of all organizations

providing health services in Africa are faith-based, though their market share in terms of monetary resources is only around six percent (Olivier et al., 2015: 1769).[1] Many of these organizations are integrated into national healthcare systems. Faith-based health providers are impressive because of their size, but also because of their track record of service delivery (Olivier et al., 2015). As indicated above, these successes have stimulated lofty claims that FBOs 'speak on behalf of the disenfranchised, deliver higher quality services, mobilize energy and resources, contribute to consensus building, connect local communities with higher authorities, and foster joint learning in places with a history of conflict' (Lipsky, 2011: 26). Such claims have been voiced despite the warning that 'broad generalizations about faith-based organizations or the faith sector should be avoided' (Olivier et al., 2015: 1766).

In order to elucidate the dynamics in which FBOs might not live up to these expectations, considering the ways they operate as organizations in healthcare as a sectoral field can be particularly fruitful (Watkins et al., 2012). A good entry point is the far-reaching engagement of FBOs in the global struggle against HIV and AIDS. In much of Sub-Saharan Africa, Christian churches were among the first to offer care and support to infected people and their families. As the resources necessary to confront the disease often exceeded those locally available, many churches began to reach out to international partners to mobilize further support. In doing so, they typically also began to professionalize their services, initiated specialized FBOs and adapted to the organizational templates according to which resource flows and projects happen in the sectoral fields of development and healthcare. These efforts were massively enhanced through the American PEPFAR Initiative founded by US President George W. Bush in 2003, which commanded a budget of more than USD 90 billion between 2003 and 2020.[2]

In Uganda, one of the recipients of PEPFAR funds was a Catholic community-based initiative called the Kamwokya Christian Caring Community, which served residents in a poor neighbourhood of Kampala (Rasmussen, 2013). Beginning in the 1980s, the notion of 'holistic care' was a central aspect of how volunteers framed their services. In practice, this involved spending a lot of time in joint prayers and singing. As Rasmussen (2013) shows, however, due to the availability of funds, the organization massively expanded its services, and the number of households it served grew from a few hundred during the 1990s to more than 5,000 in 2010. As the organization professionalized, volunteers turned into recipients of salaries and began to be divided into specialized service areas. The management set up strategic plans and defined quantifiable targets to be met. Former volunteers who now were paid nurses, counsellors and social workers had much less time to spend with beneficiaries. As the time spent on joint prayers became shorter and visits were transmogrified into professionalized service encounters, the notion of holistic, step-by-step care evaporated. Professionalization has thus had powerful effects on the collective identity of the group. Rasmussen's findings are representative of larger trends and echo those of Gusman (2009), Jones (2009) and Dilger (2009).

Such processes of institutional adaptation typically occur when small organizations receive funds from foreign donors. As they grow increasingly dependent on them, accountability to donors increasingly outweighs accountability to the beneficiaries and the collective identities of religious groups. Importantly, as Rasmussen's and many other studies show (e.g., Maes and Kalofonos, 2013), actors were aware of the conflicting institutional expectations stemming from their links to multiple sectoral fields, recognizing both the benefits and drawbacks of professionalization. This calls into question the idea that 'close relationships with communities may lead NGOs to be more transparent and accountable' (Lipsky, 2011: 27). In addition, by deepening their health-related activities through donor money, FBOs unwittingly cross field boundaries.

Rasmussen's account is reminiscent of many other ethnographies of FBOs in Sub-Saharan Africa, including our own research on FBOs in healthcare in South Africa. Here too, religious communities have adopted the standard procedures of non-governmental governance, including its criteria regarding efficiency and accountability, and have reframed longstanding charitable activities as 'development' and 'projects' (Burchardt, 2015).

The rise of volunteerism in FBOs, often viewed as one of their comparative advantages, brought about its own set of problems. Although studies often focus on faith-inspired volunteers from rich countries working in the Global South, the majority of volunteers in FBOs are locals (Maes and Kalofonos, 2013). However, in contexts of high unemployment and rampant poverty, FBO volunteerism is inevitably bound up with tensions between religiously inspired altruism and the material needs of volunteers. While genuinely inspired by their faith, most volunteers feel forced to engage in volunteerism with an eye on material benefits. Responding to these needs, FBOs, just like secular NGOs, have begun to introduce material benefits such as transport money, per diems and meals, but are restricted in providing more extensive monetary compensation by the doctrinal status of notions of organizational sustainability (Swidler and Watkins, 2009).

Given the spread of volunteerism in their midst, FBOs imported and to some extent exacerbated the ethical dilemmas of volunteerism. Volunteers seek to serve the common good, but they routinely confront the question of the point at which volunteering becomes exploitation. In our study on HIV volunteerism in rural Mozambique, we found that, while the clergy stressed biblical motives for engagement, volunteers expected to be paid while also emphasizing social recognition (Vander Meulen et al., 2013: 268). In religious contexts, ethical dilemmas pivot on the fact that, time and again, faith-based volunteers are reminded of their religious motivation to work for free, feel they are being judged on this criterion by others and remain silent regarding their own material needs. While religious communities command wide-reaching networks, mobilizing these networks as a pool of human resources and capitalizing on religious altruism for the sake of development can create fraught situations (Swidler and Watkins, 2017).

This has had several consequences: *first*, as pressures towards organizational growth—often wrought through the demands and expectations of various constituencies (employees, volunteers and beneficiaries)—developed a life of their own, FBOs lost much of their flexibility, which, according to Lipsky (2011: 26), was one of their main advantages. Instead, they became increasingly oriented towards donor priorities. *Second*, donor dependency increased even as religious communities acquired access to various sources of funding, both faith-based and secular. And *third*, as has become especially palpable in the case of the Catholic Christian Caring Community in Kampala, institutional pressures to adapt to sectoral field rules also implied that alternative visions of development such as 'holistic care' lost out in day-to-day operations.

There is a larger question involved here, namely the extent to which FBOs differ from secular NGOs. This question matters, as it is precisely this difference on which claims to religion's 'unique contribution' are based. Sophisticated discussions of typologies of FBOs (Clarke and Ware, 2015; Smith, 2017), ranging from missionary, charitable and neutral to highly religious or faith-permeated, show just how complex the question is. Leurs' (2012: 713) study of Nigeria 'did not reveal many significant differences between the development aims, values, and HIV/AIDS-related activities of NGOs and FBOs'. While organizations clearly differed with regard to how they framed their values and goals, differences were largely invisible in day-to-day practices. In Kenya too, in HIV prevention, 'religious NGOs' programmes looked remarkably similar to those of secular NGOs' (Hershey, 2016: 162). In one Christian FBO, Hershey (Hershey,

2016: 167) frequently heard the term 'faith' in employees' discussions about their work. However, they also claimed that religion was largely absent from their activities. As Hershey relates: 'After asking employees if their organization's religious status affected their programmes, most answered with a resounding 'no'. One employee explained: 'I think no, honestly, it doesn't show though. There's nothing to do with faith in the curriculum'. The reason for the observed similarities is that FBOs tend to gloss over their religious roots because of donor restrictions, while employees of secular NGOs sometimes highlight their religious identities to increase their legitimacy in the communities they serve (Hershey, 2016: 162).

While it is clear that some organizations resist institutional isomorphism more strongly than others, our point here is one about temporal and processual dynamics: religious communities may lose some of their institutional advantages if the formation of religious NGOs begins to transform congregational life. In other words, we suggest that many of the 'unique' institutional capacities of self-reproduction by religious groups resides in their existence as congregations, not religious NGOs (Burchardt and Swidler, 2020). Dilger's (2009) work on Pentecostal churches in Tanzania and other studies demonstrate that especially religious activist groups that remain embedded in congregations and stay at the margins of donor-funded civil society are more likely to retain their specific dynamism. By contrast, religious NGOs often become more similar to secular NGOs *over time*, as they are more strongly integrated into the mainstream development industry. And it is through the unfolding of these processes over time that the visions of health, illness and well-being that set religious actors apart may drain away.

The sectoral field in which differences between religious and secular actors do in fact show up is health education, especially HIV prevention, with FBOs championing abstinence before marriage and faithfulness over condom use. However, for a variety of reasons, faith-based efforts have largely failed to produce tangible results in this regard. Research shows that even longstanding exposure to Christian messages regarding HIV had little effect on sexual behaviour and intimate relationships (Swidler and Watkins, 2017). In Kenya, Parsitau and Mwaura (2010: 60) found that 'a considerable degree of failure is not acknowledged by the church [and that] many youths are unable to live up the challenges and high demands and expectations of Pentecostal Christianity that are not only unpractical and unsustainable, but sometimes frightening'. The effectiveness of Christian prevention programmes has been further compounded by ongoing rumours about pastors' sexual lives, their involvement in public sex scandals, sometimes including charges of rape, and their explicit public displays of their sexual prowess, which Obadare (2018) provocatively captured in the notion of the 'charismatic porn-star'. All these tendencies have worked to slowly undermine Christian actors' credibility and people's trust in them, at least among some sections of the population, not unlike the experience of paedophilia scandals currently in the Catholic Church in the Global North. Thus, the undermining of actors' *religious* credibility may negatively affect their popular perception as healthcare providers.

While, as just mentioned, religious congregations may be successful organizations, their visions and practices around health are not always easily reconciled with official development goals. Such discrepancies have become visible with regard to the treatment of diseases such as AIDS and the use of vaccines that reveal broader epistemological cleavages. The Zionist Christian Church, South Africa's largest church, does not subscribe to the viral aetiology of HIV/AIDS and consequently does not endorse the use of biomedical treatment therapies by its members. A subsection of Pentecostal churches also holds considerable reservations over biomedicine. Such reservations reflect larger orientations towards an emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit and access to it via prayers, deliverance rituals

and anointed waters as the supreme means to fight disease (Kwansa, 2010). While among large populations across the world therapeutic practices draw on multiple sources that are often located in the therapeutic triangle of biomedicine, religious healing and traditional medicine, notions of diseases caused by evil spirits do not square easily with official health-related development goals. More generally, our point is that Christian notions of health can surely be viewed as 'alternative visions of development', as Freeman (2012) has argued. However, to assume that the pursuit of such visions furthers development as defined in the SDGs is to obscure the epistemological differences between the two approaches.

These differences become even greater in many parts of Latin America and Africa, where charismatic pastors engage in increasingly competitive forms of proselytism in an effort to augment the revenues they gain through tithes, special offerings and sacrifices (van Wyk, 2014). Driven by the increasingly excessive expectations of their followers to heal, offer spiritual protection and make them wealthy, pastors promise miracles of an ever-wider variety in exchange for increasingly problematic sacrifices by their followers. In South Africa, media reports about pastors demanding that their followers drink petrol have stirred widespread public debates about churches as proponents of 'harmful' and unhealthy practices. Again, recent research shows that such scandals have the potential to undermine trust and legitimacy, at least during certain periods (van Wyk, 2020).

Problems with religious actors' legitimacy and people's trust in them may even show up when they are not involved in public scandals but simply because people hold on to practices and cultural orientations on the backstage of social life (Goffman, 1959). In recent, globally supported efforts to fight female genital cutting, the involvement of Christian and Muslim leaders has often been saluted as pathbreaking. As Østebø and Østebø (2014: 86) show in their study of anti-FGM projects in Ethiopia, one reason for this was that they 'are assumed to have significant power within their communities'. Therefore, religious leaders were invited to public discussions about the topic in the hope that they would dispel misconceptions about FGM as a religious practice, speak out against it, and lead ordinary people to become more committed against FGM as well. However, while the public discussions were plagued with tensions, even the public declarations against FGM made by the religious leaders on the panel did not seem to resonate with the positions of other participating religious leaders and residents. Instead, at a subsequent unofficial meeting with religious leaders, one NGO worker was asked: 'Do you really believe that we support this? Out of sixty religious leaders there was only one of us who supported it' (Østebø, 2014: 96). In her conversation with the researchers, the NGO worker concluded: 'So they pretended that they agreed, and CARE and the media were happy' (Østebø, 2014: 96). Like findings regarding HIV prevention, it seems that the credibility and trust of high-level religious leaders is either not as expansive as assumed, or it does not, for various reasons, yield the desired outcomes.

This is often especially the case when it comes to more controversial health issues. Controversies involving not only, but often especially religious leaders and authorities routinely arise over family planning, abortion and artificial reproductive technologies (see, e.g., Gerrits, 2016), child marriage, domestic violence and other issues related to gender and sexuality (Tomkins et al., 2015). In 2010, we co-organized a summer school on issues of religion, gender and sexuality in Mulago Hospital, the largest hospital in the Ugandan capital Kampala. During a round-table discussion with religious leaders on sexual rights, the atmosphere grew very tense when the debate turned to the issue of homosexuality. Even the expressly chosen public-health frame that the organizers had created in order to discuss the health needs of non-heteronormative

Ugandans did not enable productive exchanges on different views, let alone consensus. While this was not entirely surprising given the far-reaching criminalization of homosexuality and even public debates about it, it does challenge the view that 'FBOs are poised to contribute to consensus building' and that 'some FBOs are the most trusted organizations in their communities [...] creating a less threatening environment for discussing sensitive topics' (Lipsky, 2011: 32). Overall, we see that field-specific religious resources such as doctrinal authority may not be easily transposed into other fields. We now turn to exploring the field dynamics around religion and development in the field of environmental sustainability.

Environmental Sustainability

Climate change and other environmental issues have become key challenges of international development. Addressing these challenges, debates in environmental studies increasingly consider religion a key asset (Ives and Kidwell, 2019; Jenkins et al., 2018; Otto et al., 2020). Similarly, high-ranking development officials have stressed its importance. In a speech to the *Summit of Religious and Secular Leaders on Climate Change*, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon (2009) stated: '(...) the world's faith communities occupy a unique position in discussions on the fate of our planet and the accelerating impacts of climate change'. Referring to the religious leaders present at this summit, he later added: 'Faith communities can help communicate this message. (...) Your youth organizations reach hundreds of millions of young people around the world'. Against this backdrop, the United Nations Environment Programme launched the Faith for Earth Initiative in 2017 with the task of 'strategically engaging and partnering with faith-based organizations to collectively contribute towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)' and to 'mobilize faith actors and resources to employ innovative approaches to live in harmony with nature' (Faith for Earth, 2021: 4).

The academic debate about religion and ecology has highlighted the potentials of religion for promoting environmental sustainability, including the resources mentioned above. FBOs can reach people in the remotest places, influencing their perceptions of environmental problems and their lifestyles (Palmer, 2013). Moreover, in many places, religious leaders and their organizations enjoy a high degree of credibility. As such, they have an important voice in public debates about environmental problems and can sometimes influence political decision-making on these issues (Berry, 2022; Schaefer, 2016). Finally, religions develop alternative visions of environmental sustainability. In the academic debate on religion and ecology, scholars have suggested a 'greening of religions' (Bergmann, 2009; Chaplin, 2016; Reuter, 2015), meaning that religions are becoming environmentally friendly over time. To this end, religious environmentalists have developed eco-friendly re-interpretations of different faith traditions. For instance, Muslim environmentalists stress that the role of humans as vicegerents of God on Earth (*Khalifa*) implies stewardship of God's creation. Combining religious concepts and environmentalism generates alternative religious narratives of environmental degradation and sustainability, for example, by referring to the integrity of creation. Such narratives constitute religious concepts of environmental sustainability that may help to question dominant approaches focused on green growth and technological change. These eco-theologies can arguably inspire behaviour change. Many voices from the religion and ecology debate contend that religions provide ethical frameworks for addressing the environmental crisis by conveying moral values that inspire 'eco-friendly' behaviour (Holmes, 2006). Propagating alternative worldviews and values, religions promote care for the natural environment (Palmer, 2013; Schaefer, 2016; Sheikh, 2006).

FBOs from different faith backgrounds have launched diverse activities to promote

environmental sustainability. These activities include, for instance, public statements on climate change, participation in international climate negotiations, energy-efficiency measures and local recycling initiatives (Becci and Monnot, 2016; Glaab, 2017; Mohamad et al., 2012). The following paragraphs address the challenges FBOs experience in employing the three resources listed above in promoting environmental sustainability: (a) alternative visions, (b) credibility and (c) social networks.

Religious environmentalists from different faith traditions promote eco-friendly reinterpretations of their traditions, thereby seeking to increase the environmental concern and engagement of fellow believers. To this end, they generate strategies to communicate environmental protection as something inherent in their faith tradition, attaching religious significance to environmental protection (DeHanas, 2009: 148–50). Public statements such as the 'Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change' reflect such a strategy (International Islamic Climate Change Symposium, 2015). This declaration draws on traditional Islamic concepts (e.g., *Khalifa*, *Mizan*), interprets them in an environmental fashion, and combines this reading of Islam with scientific insights on global warming.

However, religious environmentalists and their environmentally friendly readings of the tradition frequently face resistance, as fellow believers regard environmentalism as something alien to their faith. From their perspective, these reinterpretations may appear as a distortion of their faith. For instance, Muslim environmentalists' strategies to integrate environmentalism with Islam encounter harsh criticism that points to a selective reading and reinterpretation of traditional scriptures (Gade, 2019; Hancock, 2018). Given the scepticism among fellow Muslims, Muslim environmentalists continue to be a small minority. Research about Christians indicates similar tendencies. Quantitative studies about Christians' environmental attitudes find no clear evidence of a broad 'greening' process among believers (Carlisle and Clark, 2018; Konisky, 2018; Taylor et al., 2016). Despite the relatively long tradition of Christian eco-theology and its arguable success in the academic field, it appears to remain a niche phenomenon among Christian believers worldwide.

Interpreting these insights from the perspective of field theory, it appears that religious environmentalism moves between the religious field and the field of environmentalism. Religious environmentalists combine concepts from both fields to develop their eco-theological approaches. Accordingly, their alternative visions of environmental sustainability can be perceived as translation efforts, translating concepts from an external field (environmentalism) into the religious field. However, religious constituencies may feel that their faith becomes corrupted by these external concerns (Gade, 2019; Hancock, 2018). This perception generates substantial barriers to a 'greening' within the religious field.

In other cases, FBOs even directly adapt concepts from external fields without referring to the alternative religious visions. For instance, local congregations that ultimately engage in environmental sustainability mostly undertake actions similar to non-religious organizations, including energy-efficient refurbishments, introduction of renewables, recycling and reforestation (Hancock, 2018; Mohamad et al., 2012; Schaefer, 2016; Shehu and Molyneux-Hodgson, 2014). Speaking about this engagement, representatives of these congregations in Germany and Switzerland refer to future generations and economic savings (e.g., energy costs) as the rationales behind these activities, rather than their eco-theologies (Koehrsen and Huber, 2021). Instead of underscoring alternative religious visions, the activities and reasoning of FBOs often reflect predominant discourses on environmental sustainability. Similarly, a study by Glaab (2017) reports how religious actors adjust to the 'secular' world of the UN climate negotiations by avoiding religious language and engaging in technical reporting. Although these actors fear losing

their unique religious voice, they experience a need to assimilate in order to be considered equal to others in these contexts, which are dominated by technical reasoning. In total, alternative religious visions may remain strangely absent from the environmental efforts of FBOs, although the eco-theological strands of their traditions have generated an alternative religious vocabulary to address environmental challenges. On the one hand, they are rejected by believers who perceive them as an alteration of their faith. On the other hand, FBOs often overstep such visions when deciding on environmental actions. Instead, they refer to prevalent discourses on environmental sustainability, thereby employing narratives and practices from an external field.

The problems mentioned above also affect the credibility of religious environmentalism. Religious environmentalism fails to create credibility when it is perceived as a selective and environmentally altered reading of the tradition. This can create internal tensions in faith traditions and lead to counter movements that seek to stop the religious 'greening'. Evangelicals in the USA are a prominent example of these tensions. While some umbrella organizations have issued public statements on environmental challenges, other powerful evangelical organizations resist the environmental discourses of evangelical environmentalists, thereby undermining support for progressive climate policies in the US (Chaplin, 2016). For instance, the Cornwall Alliance launched the campaign 'Resisting the Green Dragon' in order to counter the 'greening' of Christianity. It frames environmentalism as a religion in its own right that threats the Christian faith and therefore needs to be stopped. Similar conflicts can be observed in other world regions. In Brazil, sections of the evangelical movement supported the massive logging of the Brazilian rainforest, whereas other sections condemned it. In sum, instead of a homogenous 'green' message, religious traditions have generated an extensive diversity of viewpoints on environmental issues (for the plurality within Islam, see Koehrsen, 2021). This plurality and the questioning of religious greening efforts may undermine the credibility of religious environmentalism.

Even when the powerful leader of a hierarchical religious organization diffuses a clear environmental message, its acceptance cannot be taken for granted. Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si* is probably the most prominent environmental statement by a religious leader. It received vast media coverage and was applauded by climate scientists. Scholars have regarded *Laudato Si* as an example of the leverage religious leaders have in creating the cultural changes that are needed to address global warming (Otto et al., 2020). Some have even suggested the existence of a 'Francis effect', supposing that the encyclical would generate greater environmental concern, both among and beyond Catholics (Maibach et al., 2015). However, many sections of the Church, such as national churches, bishops and members, have disagreed with its content, questioned the relevance of the call, and only backed it to varying extents, if at all (Landrum et al., 2017; Li et al., 2016). To their disappointment, Catholic environmental groups and organizational units acquired neither more financial support nor a stronger voice in their national churches. Rather than generating public support for progressive climate policies, *Laudato Si* has rendered tensions within the Catholic tradition visible. Similar tensions around environmental sustainability can be witnessed in other traditions as well (Koehrsen et al., 2021, 2022).

Environmental protection is thus an embattled terrain within the religious field. Representatives from the same traditions often follow competing agendas and have different views on environmental protection. This competition weakens the credibility of religious environmentalism, thus undermining its potential to promote specific development policies, let alone to make its own traditions 'greener'.

Given these challenges—(a) lacking acceptance of alternative religious visions of environmental sustainability and (b) weakened

credibility due to internal tensions about environmentalism—FBOs experience difficulties in employing their social networks for environmental activities. Apart from the plurality of environmental views mentioned above, this is also related to the complex relationship between religious umbrella organizations and their local congregations. While many umbrella organizations increasingly identify with religious environmentalism and lobby for pro-environmental policies, congregations are more hesitant in adapting pro-environmental actions (Koehrsen and Huber, 2021, Shibley and Wiggins, 1997; Torabi and Noori, 2019). Focusing on the spiritual and social needs of their constituencies, congregations prioritize other goals than their umbrella organizations and therefore do not necessarily follow their environmental agendas. For instance, studying Muslim environmental action in Indonesia, Amri found that Muslim umbrella organizations collaborate with the government in addressing environmental issues (e.g., illegal logging). While pointing out the ambitious actions undertaken by these organizations, Amri shows that ecological programmes (e.g., water and energy-reduction programmes) initiated by umbrella organizations do not reach their local organizations (mosques, hospitals, schools), as the latter prefer to focus on their main activities (e.g., education programmes and poverty reduction) (Amri, 2014: 87). A study by one of the authors underpins similar tendencies in Western Europe (Koehrsen and Huber, 2021). As climate change and sustainability have become increasingly popular topics, umbrella organizations have started to perceive environmentalism as an asset in generating positive media coverage and negotiating the public recognition of their faith. They launch press statements about climate change, hire environmental officers and develop environmental management programmes and certification systems. Yet, the congregations associated with these umbrella organizations rarely follow these schemes: the majority of congregations tend to show a low degree of environmental engagement. In some cases, congregations even actively undermine the environmental strategies of their umbrella organizations (e.g., manipulating heating systems, using prohibited old-fashioned cleaning products).

The observed differences between the environmental engagement of umbrella organizations and their congregations are related to differences in the institutional logics of both types of organization. Umbrella organizations and congregations move in different sub-fields of the religious field and therefore operate along different institutional logics: the local and the supra-local religious fields. Umbrella organizations are situated in the supra-local field, as they represent congregations of a given faith tradition in a given region (e.g., country) to political authorities and the public. Given that the supra-local religious field has close relationships with the field of politics and the public sphere, umbrella organizations tend to show a greater sensitivity to public and political agendas than congregations. Therefore, umbrella organizations are more likely to adapt to public environmental discourses when these become increasingly popular. By contrast, congregations are situated in the local field. They are local religious organizations in which individuals gather on a regular basis for religious events and activities. Here, the institutional logic focusses on the creation of social bonds with existing and future members, as congregations will usually strive to maintain (and potentially increase) their membership. To this end, they serve (future) members' spiritual and social needs. Given the differing institutional logics, umbrella organizations and their congregations evolve different patterns of action. While the former may see a strong benefit in promoting environmental agendas to improve their public image and political relationships, their congregations are less likely to support these agendas, if these do not address the spiritual and social needs of their local constituencies. Therefore, religious umbrella organizations may fail in diffusing their environmental agendas among the grassroots.

In theory, FBOs may assume a substantial role in addressing environmental sustainability. Empirically, however, there is so far little evidence for this. This is not necessarily due to a lack of willingness on their part, but is prompted rather by the institutional settings in which these organizations move. Mobilizing the religious grassroots (i.e., congregations and their local members) for environmentalism is challenging, as (a) congregations at the grassroots level follow their own field logics (e.g., focus on members' spiritual needs) and (b) the adaptation to other fields (e.g., environmentalism, the public sphere, politics) can undermine the credibility of religious environmentalism within the religious field.

IV. Conclusion

Development practitioners and scholars have attributed a range of capacities to FBOs that render them particularly suitable for contributing to international development. These include their social networks, credibility and alternative visions of development. Additionally, scholars have assumed that the new visibility of religion—often framed as de-secularization—allowed its development potential to be noted. Acknowledging this potential, development agencies, governments and international organizations have opened up opportunities for FBOs to join their ranks, generating a rising importance of FBOs in the world of international development (Haynes, 2007). This is the success story of religion in development, embedded in a broader, transregional narrative of de-secularization.

However, a different narrative would take into account the history of religious decline in donor countries. Leading religious organizations in these countries—in particular, in European ones—have suffered significant membership losses in recent decades (Bruce, 2011). Against the threat of a loss of relevance, these organizations have experienced pressure to legitimize their social roles through engagement in social welfare and development issues. This diversification of their 'business models' has produced further secularization effects, as religious organizations adapt to the secular 'rules of the game' in the domains in which they engage (e.g., inter-/national development agendas and funding schemes). In this reading, it is the very secularization processes that have facilitated the increasing religious development activities, while FBOs' integration in these contexts further reproduces these dynamics of secularization. What seemed like a success story of Western FBOs becomes a chronicle of their decline.

The narratives described above interpret these developments in line with secularization and de-secularization theories. However, there is much value in going beyond this dichotomy in research on religion and development in order to generate alternative frameworks that consider the increasing engagement of FBOs in different social settings (Bolotta et al., 2019). New institutional theory and field approaches can help to provide such frameworks by emphasizing that religious organizations move between different social fields and face pressures to adapt their actions to the different institutional logics (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). These fields include the public sphere, the religious field and the field of international development. Each of these settings generates particular institutional pressures on these organizations and their assumed development assets. As such, the field of international development creates its own institutional pressures on FBOs. Those that engage in this field face pressures to adjust their visions to the funding schemes of national governments and the rationality of potential partners, as well as to professionalize their activities by employing staff based on their training rather than their religious commitment. In this way, their alternative visions of development often turn into practices of development that are similar to those of non-religious organizations (Bradley, 2009). The pressure to adapt to established models of development results in blurring the differences between religious and other development organizations.

Ultimately, therefore, rather than processes of secularization or de-secularization, it is different institutional logics that shape the development potentials of FBOs. In trying to cope with conflicting institutional logics, they may lose the development abilities that scholars and practitioners have attributed to them. There is a need for further empirical research to identify the conditions under which the particular development abilities of FBOs become effective. Such research should take into account the fact that FBOs face various institutional expectations that frame their actions.

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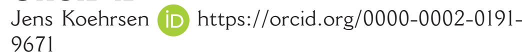
Jens Koehrsen  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0191-9671

Notes

1. On the complex politics involved in such estimates, see Olivier and Wodon (2012).
2. See https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/fact-sheet/the-u-s-presidents-emergency-plan-for-aids-relief-pepfar/

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