

WHO IS AFRAID OF RELIGION?

Dear colleagues and friends,

Let me first express my sincere thanks to the members of the Board and Curatorium of the Chair in Religion and Development for organising this event and honouring me with the commemorative book that has just been presented to me. I am extremely grateful for the continuing support they have given me over the years to build something new at ISS, something that does not come naturally to an institute for development studies, or to others working in the field of development. I can remember some of the surprise that was caused 10 years ago by the appointment of a professor in the study of religion rather than a conventional development analyst, with some understanding of religion. There were some people who suspected that I was a theologian, and might even have some hidden agenda, with a vocation to convert students. The unspoken idea was that, in order to study religion, one has to be to be a religious believer oneself. This is a persistent misunderstanding that continues to be widespread and can be found in many circles, not just academic ones. It is the logic of somebody claiming that in order to be a good economist, you have to be rich. Or, as one colleague once said, for you to be a good historian, you must be dead. In the field of development religion often constitutes a blind spot, a black hole to be avoided for fear of being sucked into it.

But this was 10 years ago. Since then the world has changed dramatically, with the 9/11 events as a watershed, which have obliged many people to think about the role of religion as a significant force in social and political affairs. The reality of the late 20th and early 21st centuries has made it abundantly clear that religion has made a spectacular come-back in the public domain, and that this fact cannot remain without consequences for the way in which we analyse the world. ISS has also realised this and begun to pay more serious attention to the phenomenon of religion in development studies. This is particularly important in the case of ISS since the vast majority of our students come from the so-called developing countries, where religion, in whatever shape or form, is a normal phenomenon that permeates people's lives. Yet, the religious factor is not problematized in their studies, as they have

learned to consider it as something private and with no relevance for development studies. This is no surprise given that development in its conventional sense was conceived as a purely secular subject and continues to be seen in this light. In fact, quite a few development theorists continue to think of religion as an obstacle to progress inasmuch as they suppose religion to stand in the way of a rational view of the world, which may thus hamper social progress; or since religion may have embedded cultural attributes that are considered anti-development. Add to this the popular representation of many of the world's conflicts today as being religious in nature, and one can see the fear of meddling with religion.

Yet, I would say, there is no escape from it. Throughout my ten years at ISS I have argued in favour of analyzing religion as a human phenomenon that can be studied like most others from within the methods and traditions of social science. Religion is a *social fact* in the sense that it is born out of out of human communities and grows with them. Consequently, at least in principle, it can be studied in the same way as any other social force or set of social relations.

Indeed, my own training is as a *godsdienswetenschapper*, a social scientist who studies religion as a social trend and as a human phenomenon, in principle like any other trend or phenomenon in society. At the same time, I am very glad that we have had several distinguished theologians on the panel today. Because although there is a distinct difference between the two disciplines in the way they study religion, this does not mean that social scientists can, or should, ignore theology in their analyses. On the contrary, I consider it very important for social science – and thus also for development studies - to engage with the worldview of religious believers, including the various ways in which their views have been recorded by theologians and other religious experts. Social scientists usually like to stay on the outside, without paying serious attention to the world of ideas represented by religion, and development theorists tend to shy away from any non-materialist form of analysis, even though the need to incorporate aspects of this cries out in their face. As a result of this bias towards materialism, policy makers, whether in NGOs or governments, have little problem in engaging with religious *institutions* – as they commonly do - for the sake of service delivery, in health or education most notably. But they are not easily

prepared to engage with the ideas and motivations of those who gave life to these institutions in the first place.

The question to ask is: *Why* is this? One important reason is because we ourselves live in a secular society, where people have generally stopped thinking about religion as something relevant to their day-to-day lives. Europe's own particular history has led us into believing that the realm of religion is, and more importantly, *should* be, kept separate from other realms of life. While this may be desirable in many ways, it is not the reality in most parts of the world, including those parts where ISS students come from. For most people in our students' home countries the invisible world that so many people believe to exist is an intrinsic part of their life in *this* world: as far as they are concerned the visible and invisible, or the material and non-material realms of life, are *distinct* but not separate from one another. Hence my plea is for ISS as a secular institution to problematize religion in development studies, *not* by doing theology but by considering what religion, in its various manifestations, does – or does not do - for the material wellbeing of people. We should aim to send our students back home with a better understanding of issues relevant to the societies in which they live. Clearly, religion is one such issue.

It is important to realize in this regard that European history has followed its own course, which is rather different from the ways in which societies in most other parts of the world have historically developed. One significant difference is indeed the continuing role of religion or a religious worldview in people's lives, which may be shaped in quite different ways. For example, we see in Asia that though *states* are not generally becoming religious, *society* is becoming more religious, such as in Indonesia and even China. In Africa, we see something similar happening, though expressed differently, such as in the form of the immense popularity of newly founded charismatic churches, initiated and run by Africans without any reference to European colonial and missionary history. These are relevant facts for development theorists and practitioners, and the sort of things that we should be researching. In fact, our ideas of what development is come out of a secularized reading of Europe's Christian history.

The modern idea of development has a genealogy in Western-Christian religion and can be seen as the secular translation of a millenarian belief, whereby the kingdom of God is no longer projected in heaven but can be created on earth. What binds both types of thought,

whether it concerns a religious or a secular utopia, is the aspiration to eliminate evil from the earth in all its forms. I would even dare to suggest that a genealogical line might be traced from early Christian ideas about the millennium and 21st-century ambitions as contained in the Millennium Development Goals. In both cases, a reign of peace and prosperity is being held out to believers, religious and secular respectively. In a similar vein, the belief in progress that is so characteristic of modern development theory reflects the Christian idea of humankind as pilgrims on the road to their final destination, where life will be as originally intended by its creator. The creators are now human agents but the underlying ideas have not really changed. The idea that humankind is bound to progress on a path to a materially better world is central to the project of development.

The point I am trying to make, as I hope you can see, is that secular development theorists and practitioners may actually be more religious in their outlook than they realize. And if they come from Europe, they may even be distinctively Christian in their outlook, except that they are not aware of it (which is no good for an academic analyst). The Indian economist Deepak Lal, too, has already warned us some 10 years ago that many of our hallowed models of social and political action that aspire to be of universal application are often 'actually part of a culture-specific, proselytizing (that is the word he uses!) ethic of what remains at heart western Christendom'.

Let me take the example of human rights, an important focus of our development policies, to illustrate the importance of taking specific histories into account. After all, I came to this chair with a background in human rights, and it remains a focus of my research. As with the history of development, the history of human rights, too, is closely connected to the historical circumstances of Western Europe. As some observers have put it, human rights in the West have 'catastrophic origins'. They are the result of often violent conflicts and sharp breaks with the past, in which the power of the State prevailed over the power of the Church and people struggled for rights in the face of absolute monarchs. Hence the idea that rights have always to be fought for (we speak of the 'struggle' for human rights etc.). But for the promotion of human rights world-wide, the question is how to combine such a conflict-based human rights model (*revolution* model) with a human rights model that, due to a different history, is based on cultural *evolution*, implying a consensus about human rights that is embedded in, and reflective of, specific cultures. Whereas the first model (conflict model) implies a denial of the old order and an active remaking of a new one (revolution), the latter (based on cultural evolution) is built on a continuation of the existing order, with necessary adaptations. One aspect of this cultural evolution model, I have to state again, is the importance people attach to the moral-*spiritual* dimension of human rights, not to

replace the moral-*legal* dimension that is so central to human rights thought and practice, but to complement it in ways that acknowledge the role of religion in their societies.

These are just some of the challenges that face us in thinking about development in the 21st century. Politicians and policymakers often complain these days about the perceived lack of effect in development cooperation. This may well be in part because it is not built on, or takes no account of, the worldview of the people concerned, which, I have argued, is often a religious one. Instead, efforts have been made to *change* people's outlook, since religion has long been seen as a stumbling-block, rather than a building-stone for development. Yet, many people in the world continue to attach great value to religion as a positive resource in their lives, that both furthers their individual progress and helps them to build society. It is at this point, where individual and social interests meet, that religion may become an important resource also for policy makers. My hope and wish for the ISS for the next 10 years is that it will become *the* place to be for all those interested in investigating the interface between religion and development along those lines.

I thank you all for your attention and for being with me this afternoon to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the chair in Religion and Development.

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