

“Doing Good:”
Re-assessing Religions and Development in Africa

Scholars of the African continent currently examine the confluence of two forces once thought to be incompatible, or at least disconnected: religion and development. This is linked to recent studies’ earlier rebuttal of another well-worn narrative - that of the secularization thesis which assumed that as societies modernized so would religion increasingly retreat from the public sphere. By the 1990s, it became increasingly clear that this had not, in fact, occurred, and anthropologists began to argue for a broader resurgence of the spiritual in realms once thought of as secular. For example, arguments were now mounted for ‘the modernity of witchcraft’, maintaining that the occult – once thought to be the bastion of irrational anti-progressivism – was in fact a distinctively African modernity. Continuing this move towards complicating simple dichotomies between religion and modernity, scholars have recently proposed that that most ‘modern’ of forces, the development technocracy of the 1960s - with all its assumptions of states’ linear progress towards material prosperity – was profoundly intertwined with religious ideologies and practices. A recent much-cited article by Gerrie Ter Haar and Stephen Ellis (that also included strategic recommendations to development policymakers) has argued for greater acknowledgement of the beneficial role religions play in development in Africa, citing not only the Christian underpinnings of developmentalist utopian thinking but also of religious institutions’ utility in reliably mediating development aid to their congregations.¹

There is much merit in this position. It is clear that both Christian and Muslim institutions, as well as those associated with traditional religions, have long played a role in the delivery of what we now call public goods and social services in Africa, including education, healthcare provision and support for the needy. In this sense, they have long been concerned with what has more recently – since the 1960s - become known as development. It is also clear that development practitioners on the ground have increasingly recognized the role of religious institutions. While mid-twentieth-century developmentalism initially positioned development as an a-religious, self-consciously secular and technocratic alternative to religious charity, since the early 1990s, development experts have endorsed so-called faith-based organisations as a means for the delivery of development interventions, a shift accentuated by collapsing confidence in nation-states’ ability to mediate aid. Moreover, Muslim and Christian organisations, as well as some practitioners of traditional religion, have in their turn positioned their activities as developmental. For example, large evangelical Christian aid organizations such as Tear Fund and World Vision have increasingly de-emphasized their religious characteristics in favour of promoting themselves as a close analogue of secular charities.

Religions’ turn to development includes not only concrete services such as dispensaries or schools, but also claims to create ‘developmental’ mentalities centred on self-improvement. A vivid example are the many West African Pentecostal churches, and their frequent exhortations that believers better themselves – not only through prayer, but also via education and professional mobility. Furthermore, as the initial optimism of the post-independence period faltered, technocratic developmentalism, in its turn, has become vulnerable to dismissal as a naïve substitute religion. Ultimately, the promises of religious proselytisers were never only about the next world, nor those of development experts entirely about the present one. For example, the this-worldly effects of formal education provided in Christian settings are well known, while even, or perhaps particularly,

¹ Gerrie Ter Haar and Stephen Ellis, ‘The Role of Religion in Development: Towards a New Relationship between the European Union and Africa’, *The European Journal of Development Research*, 18, 3 (2006), 351-367.

the most technocratic forms of development ran into problems of fallibility that invite religious responses.

While acknowledging this undeniable proximity between religion and development in modern Africa, this workshop aims to critically interrogate overly simplistic assumptions of harmony between the two. The conveners seek to work with the broad and varied definitions of development that have emerged in Africa, while also proposing a critical reappraisal of the interplay between religion and development. In particular, while much of the literature on religion and development in Africa has been authored by religious studies scholars or development studies specialists (giving it a distinctly presentist thrust), this workshop will offer a much-needed historical perspective. While the existing literature largely focuses on the post-colonial period during which the development enterprise emerged (i.e. the 1960s onwards), the workshop will seek to trace continuities and recurrences between different phases of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, much of what was touted as new by development specialists of the post-colonial period in fact were near-identical to projects experimented with at the turn of the twentieth century (although not necessarily labelled as developmentist during this earlier period). Our aim is to offer greater specificity to the characterization of development work as religious, or religious work as developmental, by creating a more robust historical periodisation of interactions between development experts and religious practitioners and their respective institutions.

Continuing with this revisionist approach, the proposed workshop will examine popular notions of 'religion' and 'development,' and explore how the assumptions typically attached to each seem to particularly lend themselves to partial or even comprehensive identification of the religious and the developmental. Participants will be invited to re-assess the implicit view of Africans as intrinsically and exceptionally religious, infusing enchantment into a modernity that in other (northern) parts of the world is merely 'modern'. While the idea that religion in Africa has extraordinary power to trump secular developmentalism demands careful re-examination, we also need to nuance our portrayal of the religious traditions under consideration. While advocates of a religious developmentalism frequently speak of religion in the abstract, our understanding of this phenomenon will be developed with reference to specific religious traditions at particular historical moments. Depending on circumstance, Christianity and Islam could occupy quite different or quite similar positions with regard to development projects. For example, Christian missionary organisations are easily positioned as the charitable arm of colonialism. By contrast, Muslim networks are often, and with good justification, seen as having kept an uneasy distance from it. Then again, in recent years, Muslim and Christian groups have pursued quite similar efforts in education and healthcare. In fact, much the same point could be made of 'development', which is not a static unitary discourse, but subject to much internal contestation and debate. In critically investigating the intersections between religion and development, our workshop will steer clear of ascribing a monolithic cohesiveness to either religion or to the development enterprise as a whole.

Finally, while much of the recent literature emphasizes continuities and convergences between religious practitioners and development specialists, this workshop seeks to trace also evidence of conflict and contestation. For one, the workshop's organizers will give greater credence to the very real hostility of development experts in Africa to religious experience and belief, such as – for example – the condemnation development practitioners have aimed at forms of Pentecostal Christianity that, they claim, contribute to continued impoverishment by promoting prosperity gospel teachings and requiring extravagant tithing practices. Although there is an overlapping grammar of self-improvement, the means and aims of Pentecostal Christians and development practitioners are quite different and perhaps irreconcilable.

Conversely, the conflation of religion and development also obscures the antagonism some religious adherents direct towards notions of secular progress. Millenarian visions may be radically different from aspirations to material progress. Barbara Cooper's recent demonstration of how evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel express unease with secular development – even working to thwart the presumption that literacy and healthcare are the proper end of human life – is a salient reminder of this.² Similar world-rejecting tendencies and mistrust against secular notions of progress can be found among Muslim congregations, for example in Zanzibar. Women's rights may arguably be another example of irreconcilable differences. Despite many Pentecostal churches emphatically advocating for prominent women within their congregations, the role of a virtuous woman is still largely cast in terms of a religious validation of wifehood and motherhood. This is a position many secular human-rights activists would diverge from, but that in turn chimes well with that taken by many Muslim activists. The dynamics and implications of interaction between religious congregations and development intervention, then, are far from clear, and the proposed workshop aims to examine them in fine-grained historical detail.

The questions to be asked thus include, but are not limited to:

- How did missionary, Muslim and indigenous religious institutions actually position themselves towards the rhetoric and practice of development both in its heyday of the 1960s onwards, as well as in earlier decades when interventions against poverty were not necessarily labelled as 'development'?
- If religious practitioners originally ceded territory to development experts of the 1960s, how have their recent successors claimed it back in the course of the turn towards faith-based organisations of the 1990s onwards?
- What are the political implications of religion and development in Africa, especially in contexts where development aid is offered by state-sponsored religious groups, including those with transnational networks extending outside the African continent?
- Given that the growth of the book religions in Africa continued unabated in the presence of the areligious promises of development, how did believers square their developmental and their religious hopes?
- Why was the mid-twentieth century, in hindsight, such a high-water mark of secularism, and how was developmentalism implicated in enabling it?
- How secular or crypto-religious was and is developmentalism in its concrete manifestations?
- Both secular development and faith-based development seem to attach conditions to participation. What were these conditions, how did they vary not only with respect to developmental and religious organizations, but also within these respective groups, and what impacts and outcomes did the imposition of these conditions have?
- What is the relationship – including tensions that exist – between the Abrahamic religions' tradition of charitable giving and secular discourses of development?

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² Barbara Cooper, *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Indiana University Press, 2006).