

Religion and Development Aid:
The Special Case of Islam

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Introduction

This paper argues that Western donors should engage with Islamic organizations, but in doing so should abstain from instrumentalizing religion. In popular language this translates as: talk to them, but don't talk their talk. Especially in the case of Islam, such instrumentalization may very well be counter-productive.

In these early years of the twenty-first century, religion is not merely the new kid on the block in Western foreign and domestic policies, but has acquired the characteristics of a new hype. One may assume that this is in response to the rise of religious fundamentalism worldwide, whether Christian, Islamic, Jewish or Hindu. In terms of development aid, this interest in religion may be considered positively: why not use every means and tool available to fight poverty, even if it is an instrument of which donors are ignorant or dislike? Why not face the fact that religion may indeed be an important factor to sustainable development? Closing one's eyes to such realities would not only be detrimental to Western aims in assisting 'third world' countries, but could even be interpreted as an act of Western arrogance that only a secular approach is fruitful. This paper, however, will argue that caution should be exercised when it comes to the instrumentalization of Islam in development aid.

1. Religion and Development Aid

During recent decades, international policies regarding the development of a country and its people have undergone various stages of insight. The main aim of development aid has remained poverty reduction, but both the definition of poverty and the effectiveness of the aid that is provided to fight poverty have developed considerably during the last two decades. Poverty is not only seen in purely material terms but has been extended to a more general notion of human well-being.¹ And reviewing the effectiveness of aid has brought many donors to the conclusion that a certain degree of local political and economical stability —‘good governance’ — is needed in order for aid to be effective.²

These new insights into development aid also gave rise to the notion of religion as a factor of influence on politics, society and even economics, and it should not be avoided by donors if they want their aid work to be successful. About Africa, for example, it has been said that its ‘development in the

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- 1) The UNDP Human Development Reports, for instance, define human poverty as the denial of choices and opportunities for living a life that one has reason to value. For developing countries, human poverty is measured by these Reports as human deprivations in three aspects of human development: longevity; knowledge; and a decent standard of living. For high-income OECD countries, human poverty is extended with a fourth aspect: social exclusion.
 - 2) One of the initiators of this view was the World Bank’s 1998 report, *Assessing Aid: What Works, What Doesn’t, and Why*.

twenty-first century will be shaped largely by religion'.³ The Netherlands Advisory Council on International Affairs reported in 2005 that: 'ignoring religion and culture in development interventions has time and time again led to a lack of local support and thus often to failure'.⁴ Literature on this subject has increased significantly since the change of the millennium, when the importance of religion and religious organizations among poor communities became apparent.⁵ The year 2000 also saw quite a number of important international initiatives on poverty reduction — the World Millennium Goals being the most prominent — of which quite a few were related to religion or otherwise opened the discussion on the relevance of religion in development aid.⁶

This insight has already been transformed into new policies. In the United States, for example, President George Bush established in 2002 the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). He did so by executive order after his bill thereto was turned down by Congress. This initiative allows the US government to fund faith-based organizations more easily for their work in developing countries. Another example is the recent initiative of the Netherlands Minister for Development Cooperation, which instructs each Dutch embassy and its local civil society partners dealing with development cooperation to describe in their annual reports from the year 2008 onwards the role of religion and religious actors in the relevant countries.⁷

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- 3) Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Religion and Development in Africa*, presentation prepared for the Commission for Africa, London, 9 December 2004.
 - 4) Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, *De invloed van cultuur en religie op ontwikkeling: stimulans of stagnatie?* [Advisory Council on International Affairs, *The Influence of Culture and Religion on Development: Stimulation or Stagnation?*], June 2005, p. 27.
 - 5) An impetus to this notion was given by the World Bank research project by Deepa Narayan, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
 - 6) Examples are the new momentum given to the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the President of the World Bank; the Jubilee 2000 for the international cancellation of poor country debt; the Millennium Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders aimed at promoting peace and fighting poverty; and the 'Sacred Gifts to the Earth' initiative by the World Wild Life Fund and Faiths meeting. For a description of the strong international sense of optimism and ambition in that period, see Katherine Marshall, 'Development and Religion: A Different Lens on Development Debates', *Peabody Journal of Education*, vol. 76, nos.3 and 4, 2001, pp. 339-375.
 - 7) Agnes van Ardenne-van der Hoeven, Minister for Development Cooperation, in 'The Outstretched Hand', speech of 7 September 2005 at Soesterberg, the Netherlands. In November 2005, six Dutch donor organizations, together with the Netherlands Ministry of Development Cooperation, initiated the Knowledge Centre for Religion and Development (see <http://www.religie-en-ontwikkeling.nl>, also in English).

1.1 Defining Religion

The problem, however, is that religion is hard to define, let alone to make operable in the field of development aid. Is it a ‘belief in the existence of an invisible world, often thought to be inhabited by spirits that are believed to affect people’s lives in the material world’?⁸ Or should one differentiate between a religious perspective or understanding of life on the one hand, and the institutionalization of religion on the other?⁹

The first definition has been used in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, and has more to do with an unseen world of spirits than with religious institutions, but is said to influence the domains of politics and economics greatly.¹⁰ This kind of religious experience also has great impact on, for instance, gangs and armies in countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda, and has become a focus of attention for donor countries that are developing new approaches to conflict resolution in the area.¹¹

The second definition of religion applies to religion as an organized institution. Here, religion becomes a much more tangible factor in development. Indeed, it is often religious institutions such as churches and mosques or religious organizations that actively participate in alleviating poverty, and sometimes even move into the political arena. The organizations and institutions mostly provide services on a grass roots’ level, such as education and health care, and financial assistance. This may explain why especially the poorer communities in developing countries have more confidence in religious leaders and organizations than in other organizations and authorities, including their governments.¹²

These characteristics of many religious organizations and institutions in developing countries — providing basic humanitarian services, enjoying legitimacy and authority — are typical for many Islamic organizations. Yet before discussing the role of these organizations, the issue of the religious identity of the Western donor itself needs to be addressed.

8) Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 3.

9) World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), *Cultures, Spirituality and Development* (Oxford: WFDD, 2001), p. 8.

10) In clarifying their definition, Ellis and ter Haar state: ‘[W]e are not suggesting that everyone is busy with religion all of the time: we wish only to convey the message that religious political thought plays a key role in political life because the spirit world is commonly considered the ultimate source of power’; Ellis and ter Haar, *Worlds of Power*, p. 6.

11) See, for example, R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

12) This was one of the main findings of the aforementioned 2000 World Bank report by Narayan, *Voices of the Poor*.

1.2 The Religious Identity of Western Donors

Most Western development organizations are of Christian background. Many of these organizations have reinterpreted their mission from saving souls to saving lives, regardless of the religion of the person that needs saving. Their aims and methods may therefore have secularized, but the infrastructure that they use in the developing countries is often that of local Christian organizations. In Muslim countries, this will prove too limited if the aim of the Western donor is to expand its activities to the Muslim community as well.

Muslim communities and counterparts are rarely bothered by the Christian identity of the Western donor. On the contrary, a Christian identity often proves better than none ('humanist' is a poorly understood concept in most Muslim countries, let alone 'non-believing' or 'atheist'). It may even bring the development aid worker, who has no strong affiliation with the obsolete Christian mission statement of his or her organization, into the awkward situation that he must state and explain his Christian motives in order to be accepted. This has brought some Dutch development organizations, for instance, whose religious identity has dwindled away in recent decades, to start reconsidering their Christian identity in order to find common ground with their religiously oriented counterparts in Muslim countries.¹³

However, the Western donor will also be scrutinized about its true intentions. That is not surprising: the Muslim world has a long record of Western Christian missionaries who came to proselytize. For the purposes of this paper, it is assumed that the use of religion in development aid, regardless of the forms it takes, is to serve the development of the recipient and not the religion of the donor. In other words, proselytizing and conversion as the aims of development aid are outside the scope of this paper. That is not as evident as it seems. The aforementioned White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, for instance, has been criticized for funding evangelist activities. In 2005, 25 per cent of USAID partners were faith-based organizations, and in that year the United States had reserved US\$ 385 million for faith-based and community activities (many of which, by the way, are in the United States themselves).¹⁴ This is in itself perfectly acceptable, but the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) has reported that almost all of the organizations funded under the Faith-Based

13) Brigitte Ars, 'God blijft nodig in de hulp' ['God Still Needed in Aid'], *Internationale Samenwerking*, March 2005; and Michel Hoebink, 'Religie wordt speerpunt bij ontwikkelingssamenwerking' ['Religion Becomes Vanguard in Development Cooperation'], *Radio Nederland Wereldomroep*, 8 September 2005.

14) William Fischer in 'The Bush Faith-Based Budget', at <http://www.ncrp.org/BushFaithBasedBudget.asp>.

Initiative had as a part of their mission ‘personal salvation, biblical infallibility and a commitment to proselytizing’.¹⁵ This evangelical zeal appears to be mostly an American phenomenon. And although the Muslim world for centuries has enjoyed the status of being impossible to convert, American evangelicals in particular continuously seem to consider this a challenge, thereby creating mistrust among the locals *vis-à-vis* their not-so-zealous colleagues.¹⁶

15) National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy, *Funding the Culture Wars: Philanthropy, Church and State* (Washington DC: NCRP, February 2005). See also: Eman Ahmed, ‘A Dangerous Mix: Religion and Development Aid’, July 2005, at http://www.whrnet.org/fundamentalisms/docs/issue-aid_religion0507.html.

16) For example, after the war in Iraq officially ended in 2003, American evangelicals sent in translated Bibles and missionaries (see ‘Missionaries under Cover,’ *Time*, 30 June 2003).

2. Development Aid in Muslim Countries

2.1 Democracy and Security

When it comes to the core business of Western development aid — that is, poverty reduction — little activity is deployed in the Muslim world, in particular the Arab world. One reason may be that poverty in its material meaning manifests itself more harshly in other countries. Another reason might possibly be that most Western donor aid originates from missionary activities and has retained its infrastructure in the countries where the missionaries used to be active, in particular in African and South American countries. But whatever the reason may be, the fact remains that Muslim countries do not receive as much attention in terms of development aid as many other countries.

This reserved attitude hardly changed when in the 1990s the democratization policy by means of civil society was introduced as a new instrument of development aid. Democracy as well as processes of democratization were definitely lacking in many Muslim countries, especially in the Arab world.¹⁷ But it was not a primary Western concern or interest,

17) However, according to the latest Freedom House survey, *Global Survey 2006: Middle East Progress Amid Global Gains in Freedom* (New York: Freedom House, 19 December 2005), some progress is being made: 'In 1995, one majority Muslim country was Free, thirteen were Partly Free, and 32, or 70 per cent, were Not Free. For 2005, the figures are three Free countries, twenty Partly Free, and 23 Not Free. [...] In the eighteen Middle Eastern

mainly because one feared that democratization might bring (Islamic) forces to power with destabilizing effect, not only because these forces would be representatives of strong anti-Western sentiments, but also — from a European perspective — because they might cause internal strife and civil wars that would give rise to new waves of refugees.^{18 19 20} The result of this reluctant Western attitude regarding democratization was that in the 1990s, when democratization was high on Western foreign policy agendas, the undemocratic nature of many Muslim, and in particular Arab, regimes was ‘benignly overlooked’.²¹

In so far as substantial aid was given to Muslim countries and Arab countries in particular, it was mostly done by the United States for political reasons, and usually consisted of a joint military-economic aid package.²² When, for example, the Islamist general Zia Al-Haq seized power in Pakistan in 1979, it happened to be the same year as the revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan — reasons for the United States to provide Pakistan in 1981 with US\$ 3.2 billion per year, which was raised to US\$ 4 billion in 1986, to be suspended in 1990, but then again resumed in 2001 with the ‘war against terror’. The peace treaty between Egypt and Israel was reason for the United States to give US\$ 1.3 billion per year in military aid and approximately US\$ 1 billion per year for economic aid. The two leading recipients of US aid since the 1980s have always been Israel and Egypt, but the other leading recipients have appeared and disappeared in short periods of times, showing the shift in priorities and international circumstances that determined the American security and national interests.²³

countries, only one, Israel, ranks as Free (Israel is also the only electoral democracy in the region). There are six Partly Free states (33 per cent) and eleven countries that are Not Free (61 per cent)’.

- 18) Sheila Carapico, ‘Foreign Aid for Promoting Democracy in the Arab World’, *Middle East Journal*, vol. 56, no. 3, summer 2002.
- 19) Amy Hawthorne, ‘The Democracy Dilemma in the Arab World: How Do You Promote Reform Without Undermining Key United States Interests?’, *Foreign Service Journal*, February 2001.
- 20) Dimitris K. Xenakis, ‘Order and Change in the Euro-Mediterranean System’, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 1, winter 2000.
- 21) Gary C. Gambill, ‘Explaining the Arab Democracy Deficit. Part II: American Policy’, *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, vol. 5, nos 8-9, August-September 2003.
- 22) ‘Economic aid’ is usually defined as aid ‘supporting US political and security objectives’, and must be distinguished from ‘development aid’ (see, for instance, Curt Tarnoff and Larry Nowels, *Report for Congress — Foreign Aid: An Introductory Overview of US Programs and Policy* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2001).
- 23) For instance, Pakistan, Turkey and the Philippines ranked second, third and fourth largest recipients in 1990, to be replaced in 2000 by Colombia, West Bank/Gaza and Jordan in 2000 (Tarnoff and Nowels, *Report for Congress*).

2.2 Motivations for Aid: Charity or Security?

It was the events of 11 September 2001 that caused renewed Western interest in the Muslim world. Western governments came to the conclusion that the undemocratic nature of most Arabic societies as well as many — not all! — Muslim countries is the root cause of Islamic terrorism and that Western support of these regimes has drawn them into the line of terrorist fire. In the words of President Bush in his speech of 6 November 2003 for the National Endowment for Peace, ‘sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did not make us safe [...] because in the long run, stability can not be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export’. It is since 11 September 2001 that the democratization process of the Muslim world, and in particular the ‘broader’ Middle East, that was already part of both European and American foreign policy, received new impetus.^{24 25}

Providing aid for the purpose of protecting one’s own interests, in particular security interests, is not disputed here. But the change of aid policy also changes the nature of aid itself. When charity is replaced by security, the purpose of aid changes from assistance to people in need to changing people’s ways in order for them no longer to pose a threat. In both cases the end goal is the same: the Muslims in their present dire situation will become people whose human condition has improved. But the motive has changed from altruistic to an ulterior motive. And however insignificant this may seem to the hard-working and well-intending development aid worker, the recipients of his aid work will definitely feel the difference. This is one of the major changes that 11 September has caused in relations between Western and Muslim peoples: the Muslim world knows that it is perceived as a threat, which is why it has become very distrustful of any Western hand that is outstretched towards it.

24) The ‘Arab world’ comprises all Arab-speaking nations, ranging from Morocco to Iraq, and from Lebanon to Yemen and northern Sudan. The ‘Middle East’ comprises Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Palestine and Iraq; the ‘broader Middle East’ adds to these six nations with Turkey, Iran, the Gulf states, and according to some also Afghanistan.

25) The Barcelona Process, resulting from the Gulf War of 1991, started a comprehensive process of political and economic cooperation that included democratization. The EU expanded this process into its ‘Neighbourhood Policy’.

3. Engaging with Islamic Organizations

3.1 Why Talk to Them?

A growing number of voices in the West advocate engagement with Islamic organizations in Muslim countries, in particular the Arab world.²⁶ This call applies mainly to the issue of democratization. The argument, in basic terms, is that Islamic organizations in many cases have such legitimacy and constituency that they are the keys to building constituencies for democracy in the Arab world today.²⁷ 'While these organizations are not intrinsically oriented toward democracy, they do occupy such an important part of the

26) Council on Foreign Relations (chaired by Madeleine Albright and Vin Weber), *In Support of Arab Democracy: Why and How* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2005); Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy and Marina Ottaway, 'Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Grey Zones', *Carnegie Papers*, no. 67 (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2006); and Netherlands Council for Government Policy (WRR), *Dynamism in Islamic Activism: Reference Points for Democratization and Human Rights* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

27) This was one of the outcomes of the Clingendael/ISIM conference entitled 'Islamic Grass Roots' Movements and Democracy in the Middle East' of 24 May 2004, in which scholars of Islamic organizations in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen analysed and discussed the democratic character of these organizations (proceedings not published).

political space that it would be very difficult to build large democratic constituencies without them.²⁸

Another reason to engage with Islamic organizations is the increasing lack of credibility and hence constituency among secular, in particular pro-democracy, organizations. Since the 1990s, Western countries have targeted civil society in Muslim countries as a means to bring about development. For the purpose of this paper, the civil society that is engaged in human development activities can be distinguished in two kinds of non-governmental organizations: those that are secular and use mainly Western vocabulary such as 'democracy' and 'human rights'; and Islamic organizations.²⁹ Western donors focused on the first and ignored the latter. This was odd from a strictly pragmatic point of view. Had the Islamic organizations not more legitimacy than their secular counterparts given the extent and effectiveness of their humanitarian work and consequently their popularity among the people? Were these organizations not much better organized than the secular groups that often existed by virtue of a few idealists? The reasons for the one-sided approach were not only naive blindness — Westerners often simply did not 'see' these organizations because their Islamic context was alien to that of the Westerners — but foremost the fear among Western donors of the threat of a political manifestation of Islam: what was to happen if these Islamic organizations actually came to power?

However, Western support for secular organizations in Muslim countries did not yield as many results as hoped, one of the main reasons being that the close relationship between Westerners and local organizations evoked suspicion in Muslim countries, not only with the regimes (many Western countries supported local pro-democracy organizations that were critical of these regimes) but also with the population — these organizations used a jargon that was alien to them, and Western money funded activities that were suspected of undermining the values of their society. For this reason many did not want to be associated with these organizations out of fear of being accused of being an agent of the West. This suspicion was promptly capitalized upon by regimes, which prohibited local NGOs from accepting foreign money.³⁰ As a result, Western donors have become cautious and sometimes even hesitant in assisting these organizations, if only for the fear of compromising them.

28) Marina Ottaway, 'Democracy and Constituencies in the Arab World', *Carnegie Papers*, no. 48 (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2004).

29) The infrastructure of Arab civil society is, of course, much more complex than this duality; see Amy Hawthorne, 'Middle Eastern Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?', *Carnegie Papers*, no. 44 (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2004).

30) The most infamous example was the incarceration in 2001 of the Egyptian sociologist and researcher Sa'd al-Din Ibrahim for accepting EU funds for his production of an awareness-raising programme on democracy in Egypt.

This is not to say that the support for secular organizations should be abandoned in favour of Islamic organizations. On the contrary, *all* organizations that meet the criteria required by the donor should be eligible to receive support, even if they are politically marginalized (as is the case with many secular pro-democracy organizations), or under suspicion as to their long-term motives (as is the case with Islamic organizations). In the latter case, however, Western donors should start undertaking some serious examination.

3.2 Who to Talk To?

Most advocates of engagement with Islamic organizations limit their argument to ‘moderate’ or ‘mainstream’ Islamic organizations that have committed themselves in one way or the other to the principles of democracy, rule of law and human rights. This sounds logical: who wants to deal with undemocratic forces, even if they have large constituencies? The problem, however, is to determine what ‘moderate’ or ‘democratic’ means in order for an Islamic organization to become suitable as a qualified discussion partner for Western donors. This paper is not the place to analyse such a broad subject, but it is suffice to say that Western donors need to define these terms clearly before they use them as a measuring stick.

Selecting suitable partners among Islamic organizations will definitely raise a host of questions and problems. Most of these must be sorted out within the context of each individual case. One issue with which Western donors will be confronted is that cooperation with Islamic organizations means that new players enter the field, which will not be welcomed by most veteran players. Secular organizations will argue that recognition of Islamic organizations will undermine their position and the legacy of secularism as a whole. Aside from the power games that are played among organizations in their struggle for financial support from foreign donors, this is a point of concern. A similar hostile reaction can be expected from the governments that have argued for years that giving in to Islamic forces is tantamount to paving the road for another Iranian revolution. Here again one enters a power game, for the governments may very well use this argument to suppress all opposition and to justify their dictatorial rule in order to fight ‘Islamic terrorism’.

These arguments will create difficult situations for the Western donors, but assuming that they indeed wish to promote democratization, their approach should be based on one of the premises of that same democratization — that is, the recognition of democratic pluralism. However, it should also be borne in mind that most Islamic organizations do *not* have any political ambitions. Of course, the extent and impact of their activities, and the legitimacy and constituency that these create for them, may already constitute them as a political force to be reckoned with. That is indeed the

reason why Western donors should engage with them. But one should carefully distinguish between organizations with political clout and those with political aspirations.

Another dilemma is that of Islamic organizations that are very active in humanitarian projects and at the same time have a militant political agenda. Examples are Hamas and Hizbollah, which run extensive humanitarian programmes for their communities, participate in local and parliamentary elections, but also maintain a paramilitary wing that has put them on international lists as 'terrorist organizations'. There are no clear-cut solutions for these politically and morally complex problems, but rejecting any kind of cooperation outright seems sometimes short-sighted. Careful analysis of the linkage between the paramilitary and social and humanitarian activities may provide solutions.³¹

Finally, the donor should exert caution towards its own actions and motivations. The introduction of religion into development issues has created such enthusiasm on the Western part that an initial refusal to cooperate with any Islamic organizations at all may be substituted by an uncritical welcoming of *all* Islamic organizations.

31) See, for instance, the report by the International Crisis Group, 'Islamic Social Welfare Activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: A Legitimate Target?', *Middle East Report*, no. 13, 2 April 2003.

4. Don't Talk Their Talk

When communication or even cooperation between a Western donor and a trustworthy Islamic counterpart has been established, three reasons will be discussed for why the relationship may be seriously undermined if the donor focuses on the Islamic identity and ideology of the organization or, worse, tries to instrumentalize Islam to pursue its own development policies.

4.1 Understanding and Interpreting Islam

First and most important, will a Western donor ever be able to understand the religion and practices of Islam? The interpretation of Islam has become so multifaceted that Muslims themselves, let alone knowledgeable outsiders, have a hard time distinguishing among them. In the case of the Western donor, a variety of 'Islams' are confronted, and hence the question of '*the*' Islam. Should one listen to the interpretation of the farmer whose well one is drilling, or the local imam, or the state officials, or the state *mufti*? Or is the donor allowed and entitled to study the Koran and religious literature itself to determine what Islam is?

The most logical source for answers is the religious establishment of scholars — the *ulema*. They have wielded the monopoly on the interpretation of Islam for centuries. However, during the twentieth century, this monopoly was seriously undermined, first by the Muslim states themselves, which after their formation and independence incorporated religion and religious rules into the state structure. The interpretation of Islamic rules became

increasingly the prerogative of the legislature and judiciary. Second, it was undermined by young Muslim intellectuals who have taken the liberty of interpreting the sources on their own, without taking heed of the centuries' old scientific traditions developed by Islam's religious scholars. This has resulted in Pandora's Box being opened, with interpretations that are often too radical or too liberal for the taste of the scholars. In both cases — state and individual intellectuals — the religious establishment was bypassed and often overruled.

When the donor, in its endeavour to strike the right cord with its Islamic counterpart, tries to engage in matters of Islam and its interpretations, it will enter a religious minefield with very serious political and social impacts. It becomes even more complicated when Islamic rules and local customs become mixed up: how to respond to local officials or scholars who claim that a custom is 'Islamic' or 'written in the Quran', while others assert that it is patently untrue? An example is female genital mutilation ('FGM', often euphemistically called 'female circumcision') in Egypt, a custom that is widely practised and is regarded by most Egyptians as 'Islamic'. However, the Islamic character of this practice seems to be denied by the fact that it is practised by both Muslims and non-Muslims in Egypt, and is not practised at all in other Islamic countries (with the exception of other countries bordering the Nile, such as Sudan and Somalia). Even the proclamation by the highest religious authorities in Egypt that it is *not* an Islamic practice has had little impact on the strongly held popular belief that it is.³²

This, then, creates a problem for the Western donor, which is undoubtedly justified in its conviction that this custom should be eradicated because of the physical and psychological harm that it inflicts on girls. But does it help in any way to approach this subject from a religious perspective? Would it not be much more effective to agree that one deals with a deep-rooted custom, regardless of its religious, cultural, historical or whatever *raison d'être*, and to tackle this issue by means of other approaches, such as health or human rights?

Another example is the status of women, which is assumed to be one of subordination and even oppression in the Muslim world. This is in many instances indeed the case, and Islam is often invoked by Muslims themselves as the justification thereof. Approaching this issue by means of religion, however, omits the many social and economic factors that are perhaps even

32) In 1996, one of the most senior religious scholars in Islam, Shaykh Tantawi, head of the famous Azhar University in Cairo, declared that FGM was against Islam and campaigned together with the Coptic Pope against these practices. In 1997, the Supreme Administrative Court in Egypt declared that FGM was in violation of the shariah; see Kilian Bälz, 'Human Rights, the Rule of Law, and the Construction of Tradition: The Egyptian Supreme Administrative Court and Female Circumcision', *Egypte/Monde Arabe*, no. 34 (Cairo: CEDEJ, 1998).

more obstructive to women's development than religion. Indeed, Muslim legislators during the 1950s tried to improve the position of women in family law by relying on Islamic law, because Islamic law proved to be more progressive than local customs and at the same time was a source of law that was credible enough for the general public to accept. The new legislation was sometimes heavily criticized by religious scholars, however, for being too deviant from established Islamic rules. Here, again, we see how Islam is used by all of the parties concerned: by the traditional population as a justification for maintaining the status quo; by the legislature and modernists to make progressive changes; and by the religious establishment to reclaim their monopoly on the interpretation of Islamic doctrine.

4.2 Right Words, Wrong Meanings

Granted, it is a problem to avoid religious issues when counterparts are embedding their needs and problems in religious terms. This is the case with deep-rooted customs, but also with grand issues such as the 'Islamic' state, 'Islamic' human rights or 'Islamic' democracy. These issues have gained importance with Western donors, putting emphasis on democratization and good governance as conditions for development. It therefore seems more than logical to study these concepts.

However, here also, prudence is required. Knowledge of the counterpart's concepts and ideologies is of course needed, as is the need to enter into contact with the counterparts on these issues. But contact and debate with Islamic organizations must be distinguished from speaking the same ideological language, for one, because it is not a language shared by both partners, and second, because Islamic jargon is not only a different vocabulary but is also susceptible to misunderstandings. These ideological misunderstandings work both ways. What to think, for instance, of Muslims in the Middle East who claim to be against democracy but partake in perfectly free and fair elections? Hypocrisy or perhaps even the feared Hitler scenario whereby democracy is used to grab the power needed to abolish that very same democracy? On closer inspection, however, one often finds other notions underpinning the concept of democracy. To take the example of the Arab world, most countries are run by dictatorial regimes that hold parliamentary and presidential elections that everyone knows to be fraudulent. This is the 'democracy' that many Arabs oppose, especially when Western countries, while advocating democracy, seem to endorse these regimes. On the other hand, democratic institutions such as representation, elections, transparency and accountability are embraced by many, including staunch Islamic activists. This explains why many Arabs proclaim to be against democracy, but at the same time actively strive for a new governmental system that often effectively boils down to 'democracy'.

What happens to the concept of democracy in Arab minds happens in a similar fashion to Islamic vocabulary in Western minds. 'Islamic' generally stands for something negative, contrary to values that are held dear by Westerners. From that view the 'Islamic' state is a theological dictatorship, and 'Islamic' law a medieval system with draconian punishments. This may very well be true when one looks at the Islamic sources or the practice of some self-proclaimed Islamic countries. But when one presses the advocates of the Islamic state and Islamic law to explain the meaning of these notions, one often comes across a utopian vision of a society with freedom, order, safety and above all justice. Few are able to define clearly how such a society would function and how its laws should be determined. The Islamic state then actually stands for nothing more than a state or society that is definitely *not* the society in which one is presently living.

What both Islamic and Western terms like 'democracy' and 'shariah' share is that they are used as clear-cut notions while they are multi-interpretable. Anyone using these notions within the context of an Islamic-oriented environment therefore runs the considerable risk of becoming entangled in an ideological trench war. Much more effective would be to discuss the practicalities of these notions, disposed of any ideological or religious meanings. The Islamic activist calling for 'Islamic democracy' must be pressed on the practical meaning of this aspiration: Does that mean free and fair elections? How can the president be disposed of? What is the role of the clergy? How about people who proclaim values that run contrary to Islamic theology? How does one implement the condition of accountability? And so on.³³ The same applies to the call for shariah: To what laws does this apply, given the fact that shariah covers very few legal fields? Does the implementation of shariah also mean the endorsement of a strict behavioural code? How about freedoms of non-Muslim minorities? How about the freedoms of those holding dissenting opinions? And so forth.

It is not the ideologies or religions that should be the subject of discussion, but the building blocks that would supposedly lead to realization of the ideological or religious visions. Questions of practicality, as mentioned above, will force people to leave their bastions of ideology, and at the same time allow the interlocutor to enter into a discussion without the need to be fully versed and learned in this ideology.

33) The author interviewed a senior Hamas leader on this point in 1996, who answered that the Islamic state that he envisaged in Palestine needed, among others, a parliament 'just like the Knesset'.

4.3 The 'Us-Them' Paradigm

A third reason to handle religion with extreme caution in issues of development aid in the Muslim world is the current political and psychological state of affairs between the 'Muslim' and the 'Western' worlds. Religion in many Muslim countries increasingly serves as part of an identity that has taken a defensive position against the West. The West is perceived — rightly or wrongly, but that hardly matters when one talks of perception — as an imperialistic force in all aspects: culturally, politically, economically, military, and especially morally. Looking through this lens may very well enforce this perception: clothing, music, literature and architecture are largely adopted from the West; Muslim countries appear to be mere pawns on the political chessboards played by Western powers; most Muslim countries are dependant on the global forces of finance and economics that are largely driven by Western powers; and a successive series of military interventions in the Middle East since the second half of the twentieth century only adds to the feeling that the imperialist times have never ended. At the same time, many Muslim countries are repeatedly criticized by Western countries for their lack of democracy, human rights and civil liberties.

In other words, the feeling of being a victim — in all respects — of Western power and superiority runs deep in the Muslim world. It should be emphasized that this perception is often not based on facts and realities. Unfortunately that is not enough reason to dismiss the perception itself as untrue. These are emotions that run deep in Muslim societies and must be taken into account. It has become a sad fact that many inhabitants of Muslim countries feel obliged to resist the perceived pressure from the West by developing their 'own way' — which is usually Islam. Hence the need to coin developments, programmes and ideologies in Islamic terms. Whether they actually *are* Islamic is of no importance — merely calling them 'Islamic' has already proven to be an effective way of appropriating them.

Hence also the defensive reaction in the Muslim world to 'Western' views and values, as opposed to those in Islam. Examples hereof have been discussed above, but it cannot be emphasized enough how common this mechanism of parrying-off has become. This has resulted in a dismissal of all of the issues that the West deems important — democracy, human rights, development, liberties, environment, and women's rights — in favour of an Islamic equivalent. The donor may feel compelled to enter this realm of Islamic values in order to establish contact with its Islamic counterpart. It should refrain from doing so, even if the donor fully agrees with the Islamic tenets of its counterpart, because the Pavlov reaction will be that the Westerner even uses the most sacrosanct to meddle with 'our' affairs and way of life. Packaging development aid in Islamic religious wrappings will only arouse suspicion and defiance. For the coming years, perhaps even decades, it is foreseeable that even the best intentions from foreign aid workers and

donors will be interpreted by Muslims in the ‘us-them’ paradigm and be met with a defensive or outright hostile reaction.

This attitude must also be taken into consideration in the case of the much-applauded dialogue with the Muslim world. Such dialogue runs the risk of being stillborn when it is structured as an inter-faith dialogue, the reason being the background of such a dialogue: it is called for not by Muslim countries but by Western countries and organizations, with the ultimate purpose of averting the threat of Islamic terrorism. This is a legitimate concern on the Western part, but discussing these issues from a religious perspective assumes that religion is the problem, or part of the problem, and what believers — whether Muslim, Christian, Jew or Buddhist — wish to enter into dialogue on their religion when the tacit starting point of that dialogue is that their religion is the source of all misery?

5. 'Religionizing'

One of the most worrying aspects of the current political debate is the tendency both in the Western and Muslim world to 'religionize' — a term used here to indicate the predisposition to identify people or institutions, or their actions, ideas and values, on the basis of religion.

To 'religionize' is first and foremost a typical exponent of fundamentalism, and one sees it happening on a large scale in the Muslim world. Personal life, as well as society at large, is predominantly seen in terms of religion. This is in itself perfectly justified, of course. At times this takes exaggerated forms, however, when nearly everything is labelled 'Islamic' for the sake of being Islamic — food, dress, hairstyle, mathematics, medicine, government, position of women, human rights, etc. One tries to make an environment Islamic by merely calling it so. The adjective 'Islamic' then serves as a control mark rather than an intrinsic characteristic attribute. However innocent such tendencies may be, they have also contributed to disturbing excesses. The term 'Islamic' has also become a moral judgement: calling something or someone non- or un-'Islamic' is tantamount to the accusation of being bad, criminal or unjust. In some Muslim countries this has led to severe repercussions such as social ostracizing, court trials and even killings.

'Religionizing' is not reserved for fundamentalists. Westerners also 'religionize' in the specific case of Islam, by interpreting all actions by Muslims in terms of Islam. A recurring logic appears to be the following: the particular people are Muslims (because we call them so or they do so themselves), Muslims are adherents of Islam, and if we understand Islam we

will understand Muslims. This explains the abundance of requests in Western Europe from police, hospital staff, teachers and journalists for courses in Islam. But there is a fundamental flaw to this reasoning: a crash course in Islam is not going to help explain the behaviour of Muslims, because that is shaped by many more factors — political, economical, social — than Islamic theology alone. It is as if a Japanese Buddhist would consult the Bible in order to understand Europeans because he assumes them all to be ‘Christian’.

This attitude of Western ‘religionization’ of Islam also applies to the Western view of the Muslim world, which, quite tellingly, is often called the Islamic world.³⁴ More often than not it is assumed that the laws of ‘Islamic’ countries must by default be Islamic law, while only a few Muslim countries have actually introduced — partly or wholly — Islamic law in their legislation. The same reasoning is frequently applied to human rights in Muslim countries: their human rights’ records are in most cases bad, and this is blamed on Islam because of the fact that the lack of respect for human rights is taking place in ‘Islamic’ countries. However, in most cases the incarceration without trial, torture, political persecution and other violations of human rights are not condoned by Islam, and often the regimes of these countries do not even justify their actions with Islam.³⁵ Another example is the assumption that the deplorable position of many (not all) women in Muslim countries is because of Islam, omitting local (often traditional and conservative) customs as well as social and economic factors that have nothing to do with Islam at all.

When Muslims are equated with adherents of Islamic doctrines, Westerners run the risk of taking a short cut that makes all communication *a priori* impossible, because in the minds — and underbellies — of many Westerners, Islam stands for everything that the West is not. The assumption is that Islam is not democratic, does not recognize the separation of religion and politics, and denies equal rights to women and minorities. The West, on the other hand, is a strong supporter of these values. This kind of reasoning has a fundamental flaw. One will indeed find very little democracy, secularism and equal rights in Islamic doctrine, as one will find little of that in the other two Abrahamic religions: Judaism and Christianity. This is the nature of these religions: they arose in a patriarchal society and predominantly deal with the exclusive relation between believers and an almighty and omnipresent God. The religious doctrines of these three religions and the recently developed

34) I distinguish between the two terms as follows: ‘Muslim world’ indicates that part of the world with a majority Muslim population, regardless of the role of religion in their lives or politics; and the ‘Islamic world’ is composed of those countries that give Islam a central role in their societies.

35) H. Bielefeldt, ‘Muslim Voices in the Human Debate’, *Human Rights Quarterly*, no. 17, 1995, pp. 587-617; and A.E. Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Traditions and Politics* (Boulder CO: Westview, 1995).

values in Western societies are often contradictory. Democracy and equal rights for women in Western societies have not been attained thanks to Christianity and its clergy, but despite them. But somehow the contemporary Christian has reached a balance between his religious doctrine and these new values. This process of creating a coexistence or even reconciliation within one's framework of values is somehow being denied to the Muslim: he is inadvertently held accountable for religious doctrines that indeed may contradict modern values, but do not necessarily exclude them.

The key question in this respect is: does one consider religion to be the *cause* or the *justification* for acts committed by its believers? In the case of Islam, quite a few Western scholars claim the first to be the case, holding Islam accountable for many wrongdoings by Muslims and a major obstacle to development. They do have a point from a strictly theological point of view, as well as the historical point of view that religions have proven to be a force of conservatism digressing into extremism rather than into liberalism. But from the point of view of utilizing religion in development work, this is not a helpful insight: first, because a focus on religion in the case of Islam may prove counter-productive for reasons pointed out above; and second, because holding religion accountable for all that happens to believers denies social, economical and political circumstances.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Should religion, and in particular Islam, be excluded from the agendas of Western policy-makers for development aid? Absolutely not. With poverty reduction the primary object of international development aid, Islam cannot be neglected.

However, a clear distinction should be made between religion and its institutions. Islam, as such, is of little interest to the Western donor, but organizations that base themselves on, and are inspired by, Islam definitely are.

Islamic organizations are active in several important fields where Western development aid is operative, in particular democratization, education, healthcare and humanitarian assistance. These organizations often have large constituencies, in particular among the poorer communities. Western donors should therefore engage more with Islamic organizations. While Western donors may disagree for ideological reasons with the religious identity and motivation of these organizations, a pragmatic approach should be considered. In selecting possible partners among these organizations, however, Western donors should maintain their own standards.

In selecting Islamic organizations as potential partners and entering into discussion and possibly cooperation with them, Western donors should focus on programmes, actions and facts, not on the religious ideology, first, because that will create a common ground for both sides and will discharge the Western donor from the obligation to familiarize itself with the Islamic ideology, and second, because instrumentalizing religion by the Western donor may very well prove to be counter-productive.

Instrumentalizing religion in the case of Islamic organizations runs the risk of being counter-productive for several reasons. First, it will be hard to discuss Islamic issues when there is so much disagreement in the Muslim world on the true meanings and interpretations of Islam. Second, words may carry very different meanings between Western donors and Islamic organizations, as is the case for ‘democracy’ (assumed by many Muslims to stand for arbitrary justice) and ‘Islam’ itself (assumed by many Westerners to be opposed to key values like democracy, women’s rights and human rights). Third, many Muslims have entrenched themselves in an ‘us-them’ paradigm that is framed in Islamic jargon: refraining from this jargon will save the Western donor from becoming an opponent of those with which it wants to cooperate.

The bottom-line policy towards Islamic organizations should be that Western donors remain loyal to their own principles. However, these principles should not be shrouded in Islamic terms, nor be discussed in their abstract or political notions, but should be explained in their separate elementary forms. For example, it is not ‘democracy’ that should be the topic of discussion or cooperation, but questions on basic issues like electing, dismissing and criticizing leadership, transparency and accountability of government, and the right of expressing dissenting opinions.

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