

Article

Religion Matters: Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Abstract: With 85% of this planet's population adhering to a religion, faith communities are the largest transnational civil society actors in the world. This accords them a major role in societal processes, including current global challenges as spelled out in the 17 SDGs, the core of the Agenda 2030. After decades of neglect, recent years have seen a rise in interest in the role of religion in the public agenda. Academics, policymakers and practitioners alike increasingly acknowledge the significance of faith actors for the SDGs. Key terms such as "Common Home", shared by faith and secular actors, already indicate their mutual relevance. At the same time, there is a lack of religious literacy in recognizing and interpreting religious dimensions in a given development context. This paper therefore seeks to shed light on the often nebulous "religious factor" in the SDGs in two consecutive steps. At first, the historical part traces the rise of religion in development. In the second step, an analytical part then provides a seven-dimensional model to enhance religious literacy and to provide a better understanding of both the potential and the problems of religion in the global quest for implementing the SDGs.

Keywords: religion; development; SDGs; faith actors; religious literacy; Agenda 2030; faith communities



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1. Introduction

Eighty-five percent of the global population profess adherence to a religious belief system ([World Population Review 2022](#)). Religion and its associated institutions have existed since the inception of humanity and continue to be a pervasive reality for the majority of individuals on Earth. Consequently, religion significantly influences people's thoughts, actions, and inactions, positioning faith communities as major contributors to societal processes, including addressing contemporary global challenges encapsulated in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which form the heart of the Agenda 2030. Furthermore, concepts indispensable for development, such as justice, peace, and solidarity, find resonance in virtually all faith traditions. Throughout history, faith actors have been actively engaged in initiatives aimed at feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, and assisting the marginalized in society. In essence, faith actors have long been involved in development endeavors, even before the term "development" itself was coined. For the purposes of this discussion, the term "development" is employed "as shorthand for all the socially oriented work that religions might undertake to improve or protect dignity, society, and wellbeing" ([JLI 2022](#), p. 13).¹ To this day, faith-based development work can hardly be overestimated. As a United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report states, "In many African countries facing severe shortages and poor distribution of health workers, faith-based organizations (FBOs) provide between 30% and 70% of health care services. Moreover, FBO facilities often serve remote and rural areas where governments have the greatest difficulty in attracting and retaining health workers" ([UNFPA 2016](#), p. 4).

So, clearly, religion plays a vital role in the development and realization of the SDGs. Yet it is only in recent years that there has been a growing interest in exploring the significance of religion for the public agenda, with academics, policymakers, and practitioners

increasingly recognizing the contributions of faith actors to the SDGs. This acknowledgment is driven, in part, by the fact that the “amount of evidence for faith activity and contributions in the development and humanitarian spheres has increased over the last decade” (JLI 2022, p. 11). Simultaneously, however, secular actors have consistently emphasized the “ongoing need for shared analytical and definitional clarity when dealing with religion in development processes” (UNFPA 2014, p. 52). This sentiment is also shared by faith actors themselves, many of whom encounter challenges in precisely articulating the unique contributions of their faith traditions within specific development contexts. What is needed, then, are efforts to increase religious literacy on all sides. To this end, this paper outlines a seven-dimensional analytical model of religion (Schliesser 2023, pp. 25–32). By understanding the various dimensions of religion—religio-scape, community, teachings, spirituality, practice, institutions, and framework—academics, policymakers, and practitioners can better comprehend religion’s role(s) in concrete development settings. At the same time, the constant ambivalence of religion needs to be kept in mind (Appleby 2000; cf. Haynes 2007). Religion is always both; it can unite and inspire people for the common good, for peace and justice, yet at the same time, it can serve to ignite hatred, strife, and violence.

However, before proceeding further, it is necessary to clarify core terms. The field of religious studies has encountered a methodological impasse when attempting to establish a common definition of religion (Wilson 1998). Debates often revolve around substantial understandings of religion, which focus on its content or dogma, versus functional conceptions, which emphasize religion’s role in a given context, for instance, in identity formation and the differentiation between insiders and outsiders. For inquiries related to religion’s role in development, these antagonisms are rather fruitless. Instead, adopting a pragmatic understanding of religion has proven most useful (cf. Waardenburg 1986, pp. 250–55). In this context, religion is defined as whatever individuals and communities describe and perceive as religious. Different terms exist in development contexts to refer to religious actors and organizations. The term that has gained prominence is “faith-based organization” (FBO). Nonetheless, the concept of FBOs, whether they are large, formal, international entities or small-scale local ones, does not encompass the entire spectrum of actors involved. Consequently, Tomalin et al. propose in their study on religion and the SDGs the term “faith actors” as a more precise alternative to the term “FBOs” (Tomalin et al. 2019, p. 105). While the term “faith actors” includes FBOs, it also comprises faith-based individuals, for instance, religious leaders, who are more and more recognized as significant collaborators in achieving the SDGs.²

In the following, this paper seeks to shed light on the often nebulous “religious factor” in the SDGs in two consecutive steps. The first historical part traces the rise of religion in development. A second analytical part then provides a seven-dimensional model to enhance religious literacy and to provide a better understanding of both the potential and the problems of religion in the SDGs.

2. On the Rise: Religion in Global Development

An indication of the newfound interest in the role of faith actors in development is the increasing allocation of development aid to recipient countries via faith-based organizations (FBOs) (Tomalin et al. 2019, p. 102). However, religion has never truly been absent from global development. Quite the contrary is the case. Already during colonial times, religion played a significant, if highly ambivalent, role in many colonial contexts (cf. Silver 1992). Missionaries, predominantly promoting Christianity, were a constant presence in many colonial settings, introducing their religious beliefs to local populations. While there were countless instances of grave injustice and violence committed in the name of Christianity, many missionaries were also engaged in developmental activities, considering it their Christian duty to provide healthcare, alleviate poverty, and educate. Consequently, hospitals, orphanages, and schools were established. As the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) points out, religions still contribute to or support

50% of all schools and 64% of schools in Sub-Saharan Africa. Recognizing the complex and ambiguous outcomes of missionary endeavors, Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first black president, acknowledges the influence of missionary education, stating, "My generation is the product of missionary education. Without [it], I would not be here today. I will never have sufficient words to thank the missionaries for what they did for us" (Mandela, 1998, as quoted in [Gifford 2016](#), p. 85).

However, this early connection between faith traditions and global development was largely ignored in the years following World War II. Secularism gained momentum in the West, bolstered by the post-Enlightenment influences that relegated religion to the private realm, thereby depriving it of any relevance to the public sphere. This form of secularism is not only descriptive in the sense that it claims to represent existing realities but also has normative dimensions by asserting that religion should not influence public affairs. According to this perspective, religion should therefore not influence development either. Yet, this viewpoint not only disregards the religious foundations of Western development but also misrepresents real life. Religion continues to shape people's thoughts and actions worldwide, contradicting the expectation that it would wane in an increasingly secular age. Although there is a notable decline in religious adherence in Europe, most faith traditions worldwide, in fact, continue to experience membership growth ([World Population Review 2022](#)).

The rediscovery of religion in global development was driven by several factors. Firstly, the empirical basis for the secularization thesis became increasingly uncertain as religion did not retreat as predicted. Secondly, the development agenda of the 1980s, which was primarily influenced by economic perspectives, led to a "lost decade" for development, exposing the failure of poverty alleviation and basic needs provision, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, as a "disaster indeed" ([World Bank 1990](#), p. 7). This realization emphasized the need for a more comprehensive approach to development, inclusive of religious values and faith perspectives. Thirdly, the rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a new category of civil society engagement facilitated the integration of religion into development. This, in turn, gave rise to a specific group of religiously affiliated NGOs known as faith-based organizations (FBOs). Considering their significant impact on development practice to date, it is essential to examine this development more closely. In doing so, the idea is not to provide a comprehensive overview but rather to shed light on some major milestones, helping to better understand the role of faith actors and FBOs in global development today.

2.1. The Beginnings: 1950s to 2000

With [Koehrsen and Heuser \(2020\)](#), we can differentiate between two phases in the rise of faith actors and FBOs (cf. also [JLI 2022](#), pp. 13–20). These two phases are distinguished from each other by the paradigm shift associated with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the year 2000. The new historical context of the post-World War II era provided the impetus for the emergence of civil society as the "third sector," alongside the domains of state politics and economics. The term "NGO" was coined in the 1950s and encompassed FBOs, including recently established organizations like World Vision and Bread for the World. Throughout the 1960s, FBOs, primarily rooted in Christian Protestantism, began to expand their presence, and in the 1970s, they became more prominent in the public sphere as they voiced criticisms of state-led development policies. These FBOs also gained attention for their alternative approaches to development, and in parallel, they started to develop their own unique perspectives in other related areas, such as conflict transformation, peacebuilding, environmental issues, and social justice.

"The breakthrough of FBOs in global arenas of development happened from the 1980s and particularly in the 1990s" ([Koehrsen and Heuser 2020](#), p. 4). The emergence of alternative perspectives in development theory and practice was significantly influenced by the profound crisis experienced within the field. The prevailing paradigm, characterized by a linear conception of development as perpetual economic growth, was not only inadequate but harmful to effective development efforts. The recognition of the "lost decade" in development, during which poverty alleviation and basic needs provision were undermined,

coincided with a pervasive disillusionment regarding the notion of economic progress. This disillusionment was heightened by the Club of Rome report in 1972, which warned of the “Limits to Growth” and their implications. Consequently, a paradigm shift appeared to be an inevitable response to these pressing challenges.

Another milestone is the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), commonly known as the Brundtland Commission. In 1987, it introduced the concept of sustainability to the realm of development with the publication of “Our Common Future”. Sustainability was defined as the ability to meet “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, p. §27). The Brundtland Commission also emphasized the importance of “effective citizen participation in decision making” (WCED 1987, p. §28). Consequently, civil society, grassroots movements, and bottom-up initiatives gained recognition as crucial complements to government-focused top-down methods. The Brundtland Commission thus played a pivotal role in formally including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs) in the global development arena.

2.2. Increasing Recognition: 2000 to Present

While the years before 2000 were largely characterized by “avoiding/ignoring religions in development” (JLI 2022, p. 13), the MDGs proved to be a turning point. Outlining eight goals to be achieved by 2015, the MDGs placed a central focus on poverty alleviation. For many faith actors, the MDGs resonated with core teachings, including the notions of love for one’s neighbor and solidarity with the poor and marginalized. As a result, they not only identified with much of the MDG agenda but also sought constructive ways to engage with these goals.

A prominent illustration of such involvement can be seen in the Jubilee 2000 initiative. Drawing inspiration from the ancient principles of jubilee outlined in the Old Testament, which advocated for periodic debt relief for impoverished individuals, various Christian actors and initiatives, predominantly linked with mainstream denominations, established an international and interdenominational network in the year 1997. This coalition had a mission to champion the alleviation of so-called odious debts faced by developing nations and the institution of just and transparent arbitration processes. With the backing of influential religious figures such as Pope John Paul II and the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Jubilee 2000 campaign garnered support from many advocates across the globe. Their endeavors bore fruit when the G8 Cologne Summit officially adopted the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative in 1999. This initiative resulted in the cancellation of around USD 70 billion in debts owed by 35 of the world’s most impoverished nations. Consequently, these countries were able to redirect their resources towards development priorities rather than repaying donor nations. The Jubilee Campaign stood out not only due to the extensive collaboration among various faith actors, its worldwide impact, and its achievements but also because it brought a new facet of faith-based involvement to the forefront, specifically advocacy, as highlighted by Dena Freeman (2020). The conventional Christian perception of the church, which placed emphasis on proclaiming the gospel and assisting those in need, was now complemented by a focus on advocacy. Via lobbying initiatives at local, national, and global levels, FBOs gained greater prominence in the development arena. Governments and non-religious NGOs began to acknowledge FBOs and gradually regarded them as independent social entities in their own right.

In the year 2000, an additional significant initiative emerged that further contributed to the inclusion of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in the development arena (for a comprehensive overview of global initiatives, see Tomalin et al. 2019, p. 104). The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) brought together stakeholders from the realms of development, FBOs, and academia. This dialogue was established via the collaboration of James Wolfensohn, the former president of the World Bank, and the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey of Clifton. For a certain period, the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics (DDVE), a unit (now defunct) of the World Bank, played a prominent role

in this field (cf. [Marshall and Van Saanen 2007](#)). Additionally, at the United Nations level, the UN Interagency Task Force (UNIATF) on Religion and Development was established in 2007. Notably, the UNIATF published “Guidelines for Engaging Faith-Based Organizations as Cultural Agents of Change” in 2009, emphasizing the importance of FBOs in driving cultural transformation. UNIATF was subsequently changed to UNATF-R, the UN Interagency Task Force on Engaging Religion and Sustainable Development. This Task Force played a pivotal role in involving religious actors during the formulation of the SDGs.

In 2014, the World Bank Faith Initiative was launched with the aim of revitalizing the World Bank Group’s engagement with faith-based and religious organizations “based on a recognition that faith-based and religious organizations are often performing the essential work on the frontlines of combating extreme poverty, protecting the vulnerable, delivering essential services, and alleviating suffering” (World Bank, quoted in: [Tomalin et al. 2019](#), p. 104). In 2015, the World Bank took a leading role in the campaign “Ending Extreme Poverty: A Moral and Spiritual Imperative.” As a result of this initiative, a prominent conference titled “Religion & Sustainable Development: Building Partnerships to End Extreme Poverty” was held in June 2015. The focus on fostering partnerships with and among religious actors was also reflected in the Berlin conference hosted by the German government in 2016, titled “Partners for Change - Religions and the 2030 Agenda”. This conference led to the establishment of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), a collaborative platform that “brings together governmental and intergovernmental entities with diverse civil society organizations (CSOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs), to engage the social capital and capacities vested in diverse faith communities for sustainable development and humanitarian assistance in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” ([PaRD 2016](#), p. para 1). Another milestone on the continuing road to collaboration between faith actors and secular actors in development is the “Evidence Summit on Strategic Religious Engagement” of 2020, which was hosted by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) (cf. [Marshall et al. 2021](#)).

This brief overview illustrates the growing recognition of the importance of engaging with faith actors as significant stakeholders in sustainable development efforts. These initiatives and conferences also show that the past years have seen major shifts in development studies, policy, and practice. From being more or less ignored or excluded before, faith actors and their contributions to global development have slowly been acknowledged and accepted by non-faith development agencies. At the same time, however, there still remains a lot to be done. “Global development institutions are still, on the whole, dominated by secularist approaches and considerations of religion, and the contribution of faith actors are still a long way off being ‘mainstreamed’” ([Tomalin et al. 2019](#), p. 107). While the historical overview helps to understand the increasing recognition of the role of faith actors in global development in the past and present, it does not answer the question of what exactly this role consists of and how to understand the specific contributions of faith actors to global development. To these, we will turn now.

3. Towards Religious Literacy: Seven Ways of Reading Religion

On 16 September 2022, Mahsa Amini, a young Iranian woman, tragically lost her life while in police custody in Iran. She had been arrested by the morality police, who accused her of improper head covering. In response to the subsequent protests in Iran against the Mullah regime, Annalena Baerbock, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, made a statement in the German parliament two weeks later. Baerbock asserted that the oppressive actions carried out by the Iranian moral guardians had “nothing, but nothing at all, to do with religion or culture” ([Baerbock 2022](#), translation mine). This assertion not only represents a perilous fallacy but also highlights a concerning deficiency in religious literacy, which refers to the ability to recognize, analyze, and interpret religious dimensions within a given context. For this purpose, the following seven-dimensional analytical model was developed. It is simple enough to be operational in different development contexts without being simplistic. This model draws on the work of Richard Friedli, Owen Frazer, and Mark

Owen (Frazer and Owen 2018; Frazer and Friedli 2015; cf. Schliesser et al. 2021). While their specific emphasis lies in gaining a better understanding of the role of religion in conflict, their insights are further developed in order to be applied to the broader context of global development. By taking into account the ever-ambivalent nature of religion, this model also facilitates a deeper comprehension of both the specific potentials and challenges associated with faith-based actors in development. Each dimension will be succinctly introduced, accompanied by a set of interrogative prompts. These questions serve as valuable analytical tools for probing into the intricacies of religion's function. While this multidimensional model possesses the strength to illuminate particular facets and thereby alleviate blind spots in the analysis of religion's role in development, it is imperative to avoid misconstruing it as a rigid frame. The boundaries between these dimensions remain adaptable and can, at times, overlap. Not every context will display all the elements delineated below. The aim of this model is to facilitate a thorough examination of religion in a given context by being as complex as necessary and as simple as possible (for applications of this model to different SDGs cf. Schliesser 2023).

3.1. Dimension 1: Religio-Scape

For a comprehensive analysis of the various functions, forms, and roles of religion within a specific context, we need to begin with a sociographic perspective.³ It is essential to gain an understanding of the broader religious landscape, encompassing both macro and micro perspectives. This entails examining the prevailing faith traditions in a given area, as well as current trends and dynamics. For example, Syria has historically been a nation characterized by religious diversity. In 2000, Sunnis constituted the majority with approximately 74%, followed by Alawites (11%), Christians (7%), and Druze (3%) (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2000). Additionally, Shiites, Yazidis, and Jews were also present. However, due to the influence of ISIS and the ongoing civil war, the religio-scape has undergone significant shifts as religious minority groups have become targets of ethnic and religious cleansing. Consequently, any developmental efforts undertaken in the post-war period must take into account these evolving realities. Here, several key questions arise. These include: How is the religio-scape structured and composed? What are the long-term and current trends shaping religious dynamics? If there are shifts in faith demographics, what are the underlying reasons behind these changes? By addressing these questions, a more comprehensive understanding of the religious landscape can be attained, facilitating the identification of crucial factors that influence the dynamics and functions of religion within a given context. This knowledge is indispensable for formulating effective strategies and policies that account for the complex interplay between religion, development, and societal dynamics.

3.2. Dimension 2: Community

The renowned French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1915, p. 47) offers a notable perspective on the communal nature of religion, describing it as “one single moral community called a Church” that unites individuals who share “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things.”⁴ In this capacity, religion serves to establish social structures and institutions, including the legitimization of authority and the delineation of specific roles, such as those pertaining to gender. The formation of religious communities also engenders interpersonal connections, fostering relationships that can extend beyond the boundaries of ethnicity and nationality. As inherently social beings, our identities and self-perceptions are significantly shaped within these social contexts. While the relational and identity-forming aspects of religion can foster inclusivity and transcend boundaries, they can also be employed in a contrary manner, creating divisions via the establishment of an “us” versus “them” dichotomy. This process, commonly referred to as “Othering,” leads to the construction of exclusionary boundaries rather than promoting inclusiveness. Numerous contemporary iterations of religio-nationalist identity formation, such as Hindu nationalism in India or Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, exploit this exclusionary feature

of religion. In this context, it is pertinent to explore questions concerning the dynamics of authority within religious communities. Additionally, it is essential to examine how faith actors' capacity to build relationships can be harnessed to foster connections and dialogue on the topic of sustainable development. By analyzing these questions, a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between religion, authority, relationships, and inclusive development can be attained.

3.3. Dimension 3: Teachings

While Émile Durkheim and the “functionalist” school emphasize the functions of religion, the “substantial” perspective focuses on the content of a religion, namely its teachings and doctrines. The teachings within religious traditions, often conveyed via sacred scriptures such as the Torah, Bible, or Qur'an, hold a central position in shaping religious beliefs and practices. These teachings provide the foundation for doctrinal beliefs (dogmatics) and guide individuals in their concrete conduct (ethics). Religious teachings encompass a range of elements, including specific concepts (such as the belief in an afterlife), moral norms (for instance, “Thou shalt not kill”), and values (such as compassion). Depending on the level of personal and communal commitment, these teachings can exert a profound influence on individuals' thoughts and actions. However, again, it is important to acknowledge the ever-ambivalent nature of religion, as its teachings can be employed both for positive purposes, such as promoting peace and reconciliation, as well as for destructive ends, via the incitement of hatred and violence. Sandra Pertek makes a compelling case for how the Qur'an can be used in both ways, either in order to cement or to contest traditional gender roles, violence against women and girls, and gender equality, depending on the hermeneutical lenses employed (Schliesser 2023, pp. 80–83).

When engaging with faith actors in the context of development initiatives, it is helpful to establish connections with specific religious themes that relate to development concerns, such as environmental stewardship, justice, and peace. It is essential to inquire into the religious concepts and values that are relevant in addressing developmental challenges and how they are currently being utilized. Moreover, exploring ways to employ these concepts and values in a manner that promotes dialogue and collaborative action (diapaxis) within the development context is crucial. Key questions to pose in fostering such engagement include identifying religious concepts and values related to development, analyzing their application, and strategizing how to harness them for dialogue and collaborative action in the context of development endeavors.

3.4. Dimension 4: Spirituality

While religious teachings primarily relate to more cognitive aspects, spirituality focuses on the experiential and existential sides of religion. Spirituality relates to the personal experiences of individuals within the religious framework, involving emotions, motivation, and a sense of meaning. It can be expressed via the lifestyle of an individual and also a collective, as seen in religious orders. Similar to other dimensions of religion, spirituality can serve as a catalyst for both positive and negative actions. A profound belief in a divine calling or task can be a strong motivator. For instance, extremist Muslim jihadists justify their actions by perceiving them as carrying out the will of God (Kruglanski et al. 2009). On the other hand, a sense of vocation rooted in spirituality can motivate individuals engaged in development work, even in the face of limited success and frustration. In the midst of daily humanitarian crises, a nun from a Christian convent in war-torn Homs, Syria, finds her motivation to educate refugee children grounded in her personal spirituality: “I draw my strength from my faith, my hope and my love for people” (Christian Solidarity International [CSI], CSI 2017, n.p., translation mine). When analyzing the role of religion within a particular development context, it is essential to consider individual and communal spiritual experiences. Questions arise, such as: What is the impact of these experiences on people's motivation in the realm of development? How does spirituality shape individuals' dedication to development endeavors? Understanding the interplay

between spirituality, motivation, and development can inform strategies and approaches to effectively harness the positive aspects of spirituality while mitigating potential negative manifestations within the development context.

3.5. Dimension 5: Practice

With spirituality delving into the innermost core of an individual, the practice of religion extends outwardly. It is this dimension of religion that is most easily recognizable from the outside. Via specific actions, symbols, and rituals, religion becomes visible and tangible. It influences various aspects of life, including dress, dietary choices, and behavior. Rituals provide structure to daily routines, mark significant moments in time, and serve as *rites de passage*, as elucidated by Van Gennepe (2004). Within Catholic Christianity, for instance, specific rites or sacraments correspond to major milestones in life, such as baptism, confirmation, marriage, and the last rites. These rituals not only offer stability during life's various circumstances but also foster shared experiences. Whether it is family prayer, communal worship, or embarking on a pilgrimage like the hajj, these rituals contribute to the construction and reinforcement of relationships, which can have inclusive or exclusive characteristics. In the context of development, religious rituals assume a significant role. Practices such as almsgiving or tithing can have a substantial impact. Fasting, for example, can foster solidarity with those experiencing hunger and create a sense of shared experience. The Christian ritual of the Lord's Supper serves as a powerful reminder of equality among participants. When considering development endeavors, it is important to ask the following questions. What religious practices are ingrained in people's daily lives? Which practices may hinder development efforts? How can religious practices be harnessed to foster progress in the realm of development? Recognizing the potential benefits and drawbacks of these practices allows for strategic interventions that leverage the positive aspects of religious rituals while mitigating any potential negative effects on development initiatives.

3.6. Dimension 6: Institutions

Within global development, the institutional dimension of religion often proves to be the most accessible for non-faith actors, especially if these institutions are headed by clearly identifiable religious leaders. Religious institutions encompass a range of entities, from local congregations to regional and national organizations, extending to extensive international networks. It is essential to recognize, however, that partnering with religious authorities frequently involves primarily engaging with elder men. Numerous religious organizations, such as Catholicism, Jewish groups, and Muslim communities, have a historical tendency to systematically marginalize women from leadership positions. Nevertheless, religious institutions, via their hierarchical structures, can wield significant influence as agents of social change. They possess extensive networks and have access to human, logistical, and financial resources. In addition to their vital role in disaster and emergency relief efforts, religious institutions offer invaluable local and cultural insights. Their deep understanding of the context allows them to identify the most pressing needs and the most vulnerable populations. Many religious institutions engage in various forms of service delivery, such as education, welfare, and healthcare, making them seemingly natural partners in the field of development. When considering the role of religious institutions in development, however, it is helpful to pose some critical questions. How are religious institutions currently engaged in development initiatives? What are their primary areas of focus, and what might they be neglecting? This analysis allows for a comprehensive assessment of their contributions, potential limitations, and areas that require further attention.

3.7. Dimension 7: Framework

Religion finally extends beyond specific teachings or practices; it possesses the capacity to shape our entire perception of reality. It serves as a lens through which we perceive the world, influencing our *weltanschauung*. George Lindbeck (1984, p. 33) captures this comprehensive dimension of religion by defining it as "a kind of cultural and/or linguistic

framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought.” In development, it is when these frameworks intersect and collide that we become acutely aware of their influence. Language often becomes one of the first casualties in such encounters, leading to misunderstandings or even a breakdown in communication. Consequently, individuals and communities find themselves unable to comprehend one another. In the context of development, this poses a significant challenge when different actors operate with different conceptions of “equality,” “justice,” or even the very notion of “development” itself. The need for translation arises not only in terms of different languages but also in bridging divergent underlying worldviews. When examining religion as a framework within the context of development, we therefore need to consider several important questions. What are the respective worldviews that underlie opposing discourses? How can the act of translation between different worldviews possibly help alleviate tensions and foster genuine dialogue and diapraxis? By exploring these questions, a deeper understanding can be gained regarding the underlying worldviews that inform conflicting perspectives in development discourse. Translation efforts between these worldviews play a critical role in mitigating tensions and creating a conducive environment for meaningful dialogue. This facilitates a more nuanced and inclusive approach to development, where diverse perspectives can be explicated and understood as a first step to collaborative efforts.

An understanding of the diverse manifestations of religion, encompassing religio-scape, community, teachings, spirituality, practice, institution, and framework, is essential for comprehending the multifaceted nature of religion within the broader context of development. This model can help to increase the much-needed competence of religious literacy for secular actors and faith actors alike, which is the *conditio sine qua non* for effective collaboration.

4. Conclusions

Based on the conviction that religion matters in societal processes, this paper sought to contribute to the growing scholarship on the role of religion in global development by shedding more light on what this role exactly entails. The brief overview of the historical development of the relationship between faith actors and development showed that religion is a force to be reckoned with in this context. Bringing to the field both potentials and problems, it is all the more important that the different dimensions of religion are adequately recognized, understood, and interpreted. To this end, this contribution presented a seven-dimensional model of religion as religio-scape, community, teachings, spirituality, practice, institutions, and framework. Awareness of these different yet related dimensions can enhance much-needed religious literacy (cf. also [Melloni and Cadeddu 2019](#)) in the field of development, both in theory and practice.⁵ Much more work is needed here, involving all relevant actors, including academics, policymakers and practitioners. Religious literacy on all sides is the prerequisite for successful and effective collaboration between secular and faith actors involved in development. And this collaboration is now more needed than ever. The transformative changes envisioned by the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs necessitate a paradigm shift in attitudes and perceptions. This transformative change relies on the collaborative efforts of all relevant actors, including secular and faith-based entities, as well as academics, policymakers, and practitioners. As former General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon asserts, “I have long believed that when governments and civil society work towards a common goal, transformational change is possible. Faiths and religions are a central part of that equation” (Ban Ki-Moon, cited in [SSRC 2012](#), p. ii).

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Notes

- ¹ Cf. with the five-dimensional notion of development employed by the UN Agenda 2030 as universality, leaving no one behind, interconnectedness and indivisibility, inclusiveness, and multi-stakeholder partnerships.
- ² In the following, the term faith actors will be used in its broad sense, while the term FBO is used to refer to the institutional level.
- ³ On religio-scapes cf., the seminal work of Andreas Heuser, for example, in (Heuser 2015).
- ⁴ Next to classics like Durkheim, more recent approaches such as those by Russell McCutcheon are helpful in understanding religion (McCutcheon 2024).
- ⁵ I have spelled out in detail what the seven-dimensional model of religion means in terms of concrete SDGs by applying this model to the following SDGs: SDGs 1 and 2 (“No poverty” and “Zero hunger”), SDG 3 (“Good Health and Well-Being”), SDG 4 (“Quality Education”), SDG 5 (“Gender Equality”), SDG 10 (“Reduced Inequality”), SDG 13 (“Climate Action”) and SDG 16 (“Peace and Justice”) in Schliesser 2023.

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