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A BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER: HOW WORLDVIEW HELPS OVERCOME THE RELIGIOUS-SECULAR DIVIDE IN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AND BEYOND

By Yannicke Goris and Simon Polinder

Atheist, humanist, progressive, critical thinker. Readers identifying with these descriptions may regard religious actors—such as faith-based organizations, religious institutions, and religious individuals—with some skepticism or suspicion. The secular "us" not seldom perceive the religious "them" as conservative, naïve, and old-fashioned. Some might even add stronger adjectives, such as backward, narrow-minded, or homophobic. And religious actors, in turn, have their own polarizing labels for the secular "other" (Goris and Kapazoglou 2021, 32; Wilkinson 2022, 98). Naturally, this dichotomous landscape is an oversimplified image of a complex reality, marked by many nuanced ideas across the religious-secular divide. Still, the divide exists, and it is perpetuated and deepened by widespread prejudice and stereotypes among religious and non-religious perspectives (Seiple et al. 2021, 5).

Mutual preconceptions of secular and religious actors are often based on a lack of understanding and knowledge and, as a result,

Abstract: As research has shown, collaboration between religious and non-religious actors in the context of international development is often difficult and limited. Though various barriers exist, mutual misunderstanding and prejudices appear to be the main reason for the religious-secular divide. This essay argues that this divide—both within the development sector and beyond—can be bridged more effectively by understanding religion in terms of "worldview." As everyone holds a certain worldview, this concept challenges the current dichotomy and creates a more level playing field as starting point for dialogue. Problematic for the development sector, however, is the widespread equation of secularity with neutrality, and of neutrality with professionalism. The "professional identity" concept can help uncouple this connection.

Keywords: International development cooperation, secular-religious collaboration, religion, worldview, professional identity, equality, dialogue

mask commonalities and opportunities for collaboration. This was one of the key findings of a recent research project "Working with Faith-based Actors for Development", carried out by the secular knowledge brokering organization The Broker and commissioned by a consortium of five Christian development organizations (Goris and Kapazoglou 2021, 11).[1] The project was initiated in response to a paradoxical situation in international development: On the one hand, most of the major development donors acknowledge the relevance and importance of faith-based organizations (FBOs) for development cooperation, and in the academic sphere attention to religions and development has grown and solidified over the last decade (Ager and Ager 2016, 101; Wilkinson 2022, 91). On the other hand, collaboration with FBOs is not high on the political and development agendas, and endeavors to establish partnerships are laced with (real and perceived) barriers.

Researchers Yannicke Goris and Martha Kapazoglou—at the time both employed at The Broker—embarked on a project to identify the most important barriers and opportunities for working with faith-based actors in the development sector. Both identifying as non-religious, Goris and Kapazoglou, though valuing open-mindedness and tolerance, came into the project with their own preconceived ideas, guards up, and various doubts on their mind: Was it not likely that, in working with the religious commissioning parties, convictions and beliefs of the *others* would stand in too sharp a contrast to *our* ideas? Surely, to safeguard a sound working relationship, the fact that one of the researchers identifies as lesbian should be kept quiet for the religious partners? And is it not pretty likely that *they* will try to avoid discussing tricky issues like gender equality, LGBTQI + inclusion or evangelizing; issues *we* think should be addressed?

With these admittedly biased questions and reservations in mind, Goris and Kapazoglou commenced their project—a project that served to diagnose the gap between religious and secular development actors and seek pathways to bridge this gap for more sustainable and effective development cooperation. A widely lauded report, three case studies, a very fruitful multi-stakeholder dialogue and ongoing initiatives were the direct result.[2] Moreover, as a side effect, the project yielded outcomes on a more personal level: Both researchers became more aware of their own biases, their prejudices were challenged, and they found themselves engaged in unexpected, open conversations with the "other" who turned out not that different after all. Thus, doors for collaboration were opened.

In fact, the door for collaboration between the two authors of this essay was opened by the "Working with Faith-Based Actors for Development" project. A year before the report of The Broker was published, Simon Polinder defended his dissertation on religion and international relations. One of his conclusions was that the concept of worldview could overcome the secular-religious divide, matching with The Broker's insights. When Polinder and Goris met, the first seeds for a scholarly collaboration were planted. During their conversations they found out that besides the concept of worldview, the embrace of a professional identity also played a role in the research process of Goris and Kapazoglou. The outline of this essay was born.

Making Sense of the Complex Role of Religion in Development Work

As the project "Working with Faith-Based Actors for Development" as well as other academic research shows, collaboration between religious and non-religious actors in the context of international development is often difficult and remains limited (Goris and Kapazoglou 2021, 1; Wilkinson 2022, 94). This is not least due to the fact that, as most development practitioners will know from experience, the role of religion in development work is complex and varied (Wilkinson 2022, 96). The way religion manifests itself and affects development initiatives—for the good or the bad—differs between contexts and situations. According to Stegeman (2020) this complexity and variety should not come as a surprise. As the role of religion is complex and layered at the individual level—even in the lives of religious people—it is no wonder that it becomes even more

complicated in the highly dynamic and political environment of international development.

In part, it is this complexity that underpins the inability of secular and religious development actors to effectively collaborate at a greater scale. Not only do many negative preconceptions about religion persist (Goris and Kapazoglou 2021, 11), religion is also often understood in too narrow, categorical terms. That is, religion is mostly analyzed as a separate realm; a category like politics, economics, culture class, race, gender and so on, intersecting with each of these spheres (Wilson 2022, 15). Figure 1 visualizes this idea: religion is intimately connected to all other domains, interwoven with all aspects of life (Wilson 2022, 25). Yet, while the complex relations of religion with the other domains is acknowledged, religion remains "just another category"; a tangible sphere comprised of the major world religions, religious actors, or religious NGOs. This visible, institutional dimension of religion, however, is only part of the picture (Thomas 2005, 21–23; Wilson 2012, 69; Polinder 2021, 114).

What is needed to make the image better reflect reality around us is an additional layer; a way to show that religion is not only a tangible sphere that relates to the other domains but is more encompassing and goes much deeper. What an image that captures the full complexity of religion would show—if such a feat is at all feasible—is that religion is connected to, shapes, and informs one's understanding of the other domains. To understand how this works, the notion of "worldview" is instrumental.

"Worldview" to Level the Playing Field

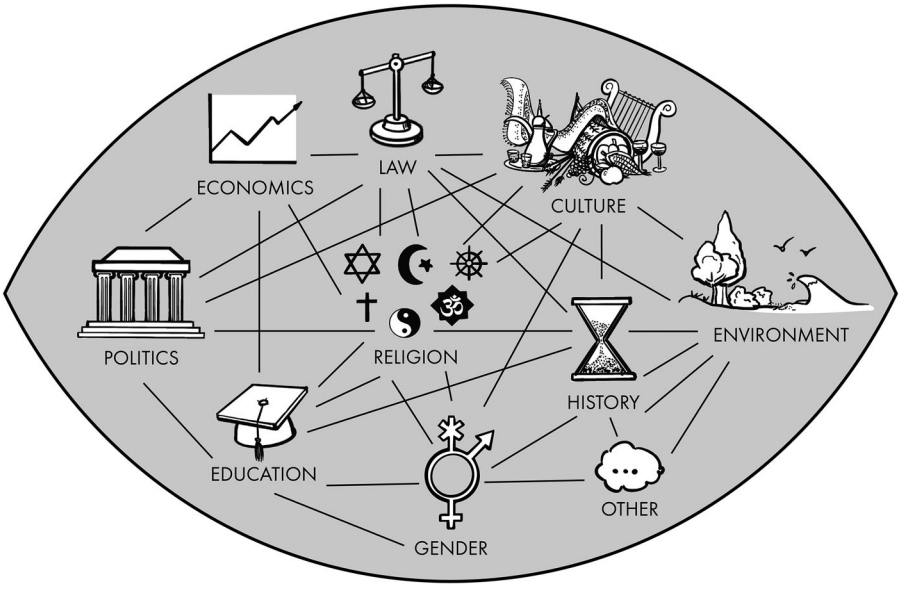
A worldview consists of two parts: personal, ultimate commitments (sometimes also referred to as faith or trust commitments) and beliefs (Polinder 2021, 45). The secular worldview implies a set of beliefs about an ultimate reality and personal commitment without a transcendent reference point. The religious worldview, similarly, consists of a set of beliefs about an ultimate reality and personal commitment, but differs in that it is based on a transcendent reference point. If one uses this idea of "worldview" when drawing an image of the place of religion, it becomes clear that a separate sphere does not suffice. People who work in the various aforementioned domains—economics, education, politics, etc.—all have a certain worldview that shapes how they perceive and behave in this realm. Thus, worldview is not a separate entity; it is an all-pervading dimension that influences someone's ideas on issues ranging from birth, death, relationships, and food, to expenditures, education, clothing, and gender issues. If religion is understood in terms of worldview, its separateness becomes untenable, its complexity unmistakable.

The advantage of using the worldview concept is twofold. First, as Wilson (2022, 3–4) puts it, it helps avoid talking about religion as a separate category, yet still offers a framework to feasibly approach it. Second, by understanding religion in terms of worldview, a level playing field is created. No longer is one forced to think in the dichotomous categories of religious versus secular people (Polinder 2009, 163). Instead, given the assumption that most, if not all, people hold a worldview—no matter how unarticulated or unconscious—everyone is on an equal footing (Vroom 2006, 2). A worldview can be more or less extensive and sophisticated. It can have different directions: this world, a transcendent world, God, or an immanent reality. Yet, as all worldviews are the same in that they consist of a set of beliefs about an ultimate reality and personal commitment, none can claim superiority. One can argue for the plausibility of one's worldview over another, but the starting point of the conversation is one of equality.

Religion, Worldviews, and Neutrality: The Development Dilemma

The project "Working with Faith-Based Actors for Development" was motivated by the observation that collaboration between religious and secular development practitioners is laced with difficulties, hesitations, and mutual prejudices (Goris and Kapazoglou 2021, 1). As the foregoing explains, part of this problem could be overcome by the introduction of the worldview concept, creating a more level playing

Figure 1. Intersectional Understanding of Context. Made by Jessica Mills Design and Visualisation, co-created by Prof. Dr. Erin Wilson, *Religion and World Politics: Connecting Theory with Practice*. London: Routledge, 2022.



field and thus allowing for more equitable collaborations to emerge. There is, however, an important barrier that might throw a spanner in the works: the introduction and embrace of the worldview concept threatens to spoil the carefully constructed neutral, modernist, and apolitical varnish that covers the development project (Ager and Ager 2016, 102).

Though scholars and policy makers alike recognize that development cooperation must be understood as a political process, and many development practitioners—religious and secular alike—have by now rejected the premise of total neutrality (Leftwich 2005; Haan 2011; Gulrajani et al. 2021; Seiple et al. 2021, 4), development cooperation continues to be widely presented and perceived as something inherently good, positive, impartial. Yet, the common understanding of the development practitioner as an impartial, professional do-gooder fails to acknowledge the highly political and value-laden nature of the development project. Agencies and practitioners present interventions in a technocratic, supposedly objective manner, suggesting that their work is not affected by their own values and beliefs (Lohmann and Ferguson 1994, 178; Li 2007, 279; Hout and Robison 2009, 7). In this narrative, worldviews have no place: The "impartial" development practitioner is a neutral actor; beliefs are something that "others" have (Ager and Ager 2016, 103). Following this logic, the development professional—the true professional—is, by definition, a secular professional. So, while secularity of an organization would ensure neutrality, a religious affiliation risks partiality and proselytizing (Wilkinson 2018, 462; Goris and Kapazoglou 2021, 18; Seiple et al. 2021, 5). By contrast, if one were to accept the idea that "everybody holds a worldview," the purported neutrality of secular practitioners can no longer be upheld. Acceptance of the worldview concept would imply that both religious and secular development actors bring their beliefs and values to development practice. The only difference being that the latter are informed by different, secular ideologies, such as neoliberalism, feminism, humanism, and others (Wilkinson, as cited in Goris and Kapazoglou 2021, 21).

The inability or unwillingness to recognize the ubiquity and impact of worldviews became particularly clear when interviewing development practitioners in the context of the "Working with Faith-Based Actors for

Development" project. Representatives of secular organizations who had previously worked with religious actors were questioned about how religion, faith, and worldviews more generally had impacted the collaboration dynamics in practice. Rather than recognition and straightforward answers, this line of questioning caused confusion. Interviewees responded that neither religion nor worldviews played a role in their programs. As their projects were not about religious rights or minorities, religion was not regarded as a relevant factor. Thus, by ignoring the impact of religion and worldviews, the varnish of neutrality could be kept intact (Goris and Kapazoglou 2021, 19).

One of the most important findings of the project was that "open and honest dialogue between secular and faith-based development actors is a vital precondition to realize meaningful collaborations" (Goris and Kapazoglou 2021, 32). The most fruitful point of departure for such an honest dialogue is a level playing field. And, as established in the foregoing, the introduction of the worldview concept would help achieve this very point of departure. What we seem to be left with, however, is a particularly tricky Gordian knot. Recognizing worldviews as belonging to all, and not something reserved to religious development actors, threatens the idea of neutrality of development cooperation, which is central to its professionalism. The way out, therefore, requires unsettling the secular = neutral = professional equation.

THE WAY OUT, THEREFORE, REQUIRES UNSETTLING THE SECULAR = NEUTRAL = PROFESSIONAL EQUATION

Professional Identity

To uncouple the connection, a critical examination of the idea of "professional identity" can be helpful. In general, ideas about professional identity are closely related to the secular = neutral = professional connection. Building one's professional identity demands learning and development, which are equated with the measurable acquisition of knowledge and skills. As Ruijters and Simons (2020) argue, however, this type of development is only part of the picture. Building one's professional identity is not only about acquiring knowledge and skills, it is also about critically reflecting on what this knowledge means to you, how it impacts your work, and, crucially, how it affects you as a person (Ruijters and Simons 2020, 46). This personal dimension that Ruijters & Simons introduce is of particular importance. The professional identity, they argue, is not only about who you are in the isolated realm of work. Instead, the professional identity connects who you are as a person, the work you do, and the context in which you operate (2020, 48). Developing the personal identity, thus, becomes a more encompassing endeavor. It requires a critical self-reflection on how the personal and professional self affect one another; and, therefore, on how one's worldview interacts and affects one's *modus operandi* in the professional realm (Ruijters and Simons 2020, 46).

Ruijters & Simons' understanding of professional identity can be used to replace the development sector's secular = neutral = professional trinity. Instead of equating professionalism with ignoring or setting aside worldviews, Ruijters' & Simons' professional identity concept invites a critical reflection on the way in which one's worldviews affect person, profession, and context. A good professional—in the development sector as well as in any other sphere of work—knows how their professional self (e.g. professional norms and values, personal knowledge base, area of expertise) relates to the personal self, and how their worldview, personal norms, and values affect their work and professional relations (Ruijters and Simons 2020, 47–8).

In the context of development work, professionals who are able to integrate their personal and professional selves, embracing and engaging with the wide diversity in worldviews, are better equipped to engage in honest and open dialogue with colleagues in their field (Ager and Ager 2016, 104). After all, they know how their worldview—secular or religious—affects their own professional work, so they can understand

that the same holds true for others, even if their worldviews are very different. The professional identity, thus, helps recognize the impact of worldview—the "beliefs and baggage" one brings to the engagement—creating a level playing field and, as such, contributes to bridging gaps and finding common ground and opportunities for collaboration (Wilkinson 2021, 80).

For Goris and Kapazoglou, the "Working with Faith-Based Actors for Development" project was a catalyst for the development of their own professional identity. It made them aware of their biases and prejudices; challenging many, confirming a few. It challenged them to critically reflect on their own worldview and how it affects their work and personal life. By the end of the project, which lasted over 6 months, their professional relationship with the religious organizations commissioning the research could hardly have been better. Differences remain and some may never be overcome. Yet, open dialogue is possible and commonalities more numerous than expected; most important of which is the shared possession of a worldview. ❖

About the Authors

Yannicke Goris is a PhD candidate at Radboud University Nijmegen (NL). Her interdisciplinary research focuses on the role of civil society in the contestation over civic space and democratic erosion, and combines a historical and political science perspective. Previously, Yannicke worked as a knowledge broker in the field of sustainable development cooperation, focusing on issues of civic space and civil society activism.

Simon Polinder, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher at Utrecht University (NL). His research is on the role of religious leaders dealing with violent extremism and terrorism in Kenya and Nigeria. He wrote a dissertation on religion and international relations (theory). He also edited the volume *Christian Faith, Philosophy and International Relations* which was published with Brill.

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Notes

1. In October 2021, The Broker, acknowledge brokering organization in the field of international development cooperation, was commissioned by Prisma and four of its member organizations (Dorcas, Tearfund NL, Woord en Daad and World Vision), to conduct a research project, "Working with Faith-based Actors for Development." At the time, authors Yannicke Goris and Martha Kapazoglou were both employed at The Broker. The synthesis report that resulted from their research have formed the basis and inspiration for this article. The synthesis report can be downloaded here: https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/working-with-religious-actors-a-synthesis-report/
2. The three case studies can be downloaded here: https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/case-studies-bring-research-on-religious-actors-in-development-to-life/. A brief report on the dialogue workshop hosted by The Broker can be found here: https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/in-conversation-working-with-faith-based-actors-for-development/. The resulting dialogue guide to facilitate open dialogue on working with religious actors is available here: https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/working-with-faith-based-actors-for-sustainable-development-a-dialogue-guide/. Additionally, Prisma has launched a blog series titled "Dialogue on Collaborating with FBOs" (in Dutch) which can be found on their website: https://www.prismaweb.org/nl/category/blog.

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