

# Global Trends Religion and Development

## Food for thought for members and partners of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)

*The following paper was presented by Dr Dietrich Werner, PaRD Steering Board Member, at the PaRD Leadership Meeting, Lisbon, 29 February 2024.*

Religion matters! This conviction lies behind PaRD's history and mandate.<sup>1</sup> There is sufficient data to back up this motto:

- 6 billion people (85% of the world's population) affiliate with a faith/religion
- Faith groups own and are responsible for more than 8% of the Earth's habitable land
- Faith groups own and are responsible for more than 5% of all commercial forests on the planet
- Half of schools worldwide (50%) are owned or operated by faith groups, rising to 64% of schools in sub-Saharan Africa
- More than 4 in 10 health services (40%) in some countries are operated by faith groups
- 10% of the world's financial institutions are faith-related, making faith institutions the world's third largest investor
- Faith-aligned impact investment capital is valued at \$3 trillion worldwide (Oxford Faith-Aligned Impact Finance).<sup>2</sup>

Apart from this data, one needs to consider that faith actors and organisations (FBOs) are to be found all over the globe. They are grounded in almost every local culture. FBOs draw on many volunteers who are not driven by salaries but religious inspiration. And beyond concrete support for those in need, religion brings hope, ethical orientation and strengthens resilience. These are all key aspects which are essential for social and ecological transformation.<sup>3</sup>

One recent example expressing the convening power of faith actors for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been the Abu Dhabi Interfaith Statement for COP 28 and the Call to Action. These are probably one of the most powerful statements on principal ecological transformation for the whole world which were ever produced, expressing the urgent need for a new global model of measuring prosperity and development.<sup>4</sup>

With the following six points, resulting from some recent observations and conversations within the PaRD leadership, I would like to stimulate creative thinking on where we have to reflect and reposition ourselves in a rapidly changing world:

### **1) The significance of religious life and convictions varies across regions and generations**

The Ipsos Global Religion Survey 2023, which focused on opinions and patterns in 26 countries, states that in the global South the significance of religion is very high (90%), whereas in European and more secular countries, religion plays a less important role. 47% of all those asked hold the

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2023-de-religion-matters.pdf>; [https://www.partner-religion-development.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/BMZ\\_2016\\_More\\_than\\_anything.pdf](https://www.partner-religion-development.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/BMZ_2016_More_than_anything.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See: UNEP infographic <https://images.app.goo.gl/5iGi7ktF4F4bNei7A>

<sup>3</sup> See in: <https://theconversation.com/faith-communities-are-rallying-to-check-climate-change-their-size-and-influence-counts-217867?fbclid=IwAR0xvvmYnd9k8RAFLpfDQQdIDhSnnZLYBhpW-gsLAa9oD3zF8AcHbpGoHg>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.partner-religion-development.org/cop28-spirituality-and-faith-showed-they-could-be-a-beacon-of-hope/>; <https://www.partner-religion-development.org/faith-pavilion-call-to-action/>; <https://www.partner-religion-development.org/global-faith-leaders-summit-interfaith-statement-for-cop28/>

conviction that religion causes more harm than benefits. In Europe this group is between 66% (UK) and 70% (Sweden). Negative examples like sexualized violence occurring in Christian institutions, fundamentalist interpretations and nationalistic misuse of religion have weakened confidence in religion.

Two major general global trends can be observed: There is a geographic (more secular North against more religious South) and generational divide. Major generational shifts are emerging in many of the 26 countries surveyed. Younger people less likely identify with religion than adults (this is applying especially to Catholics and Muslims).<sup>5</sup>

The results indicate that especially religious leaders need to listen more carefully and cater the needs especially of young people in a better way. They also need to overcome everything that damages the good reputation of faith.

## **2) Strengthening holistic approaches for alternative frameworks on peace and development**

The root cause of all major global problems is the capitalistic growth paradigm. The Abu Dhabi Interfaith Statement for COP 28 and the Call to Action both have made the passionate and far-sighted plea “to overcome the linear growth paradigm and move to a circular model that allows us to live a balanced and dignified life in harmony with nature”, and develop a binding Holistic Well-being Index. This is one important example which shows that the nexus between religious values and political agendas lies in the field of holistic approaches, ethics, and values, along with contextualised communication about the key role of faith actors in sustainable development. Current national and multilateral policies need ethical orientation frameworks and guiding principles, but also more joint action in trying to spell out how an alternative development and prosperity paradigm could be implemented.

Alliances such as PaRD could be a space in the future to provide a strategic platform for such global and principal dialogues on alternative frameworks. Research and academic monitoring are important here to showcase what added value faith and Indigenous actors can create for such global processes. The research outcomes not only need to be made known in political discourses but also in school curricula and in higher education.

## **3) Mobilizing the preventive, (post-conflict) mediating and peace building potential of religious actors**

The parliament in Germany has just received the first interim evaluation on the evaluation of the deployment of German troops in Afghanistan (Zwischenbericht der Enquete-Kommission „Lehren aus Afghanistan für das künftige vernetzte Engagement Deutschlands“).<sup>6</sup> It sheds light on the failure of western military interventions along with a massive breakdown of human rights standards, particularly for women and children. One of the root causes for this has been the negligence of culture, religion, traditional values and leadership in the planning of international interventions. The worsening situation of human rights is extremely alarming in many regions, including Afghanistan, DRC Congo, Myanmar, Palestine, and in the occupied territories in Ukraine. On top of this, groups who try to undermine democratic values also in western democracies like in Germany and the USA are growing. And we should not forget a possible renaissance of threats based on nuclear weapons.

The public role of religious actors in these discourses at global and regional level still has a rather low profile. Religious actors need to come out of their silos, and move beyond loose networks and

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ipsos.com/en/two-global-religious-divides-geographic-and-generational>

<sup>6</sup> Zwischenbericht der Enquete-Kommission „Lehren aus Afghanistan 20. February 2024, in:

<https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2024/kw08-pa-enquete-afghanistan-zwischenbericht-990172>

interfaith statements. They need to collaborate and mobilise in such a way that they can become more binding and authoritative partners in mediation and post-conflict situations, also in UN decisions, particularly in the Security Council?<sup>7</sup>

What does the current unprecedented global peace and justice crisis demand from religious leaders and organisations? A recent Germany study paper, published by FEST on “Religions, Diplomacy and Peace”(2023) is demanding for much more deliberate steps towards establishing a reflected “foreign policy of religions” (“Religionsausßenpolitik”).<sup>8</sup> It outlines the need to strengthen the interaction between religion and politics not only in the area of humanitarian and development work, but also in the area of diplomacy and foreign policies, preventive conflict mediation, post-conflict processes of peace reconstruction, and peace diplomacy.

There is a need to make the voices of the voiceless heard. A first step could be that PaRD in collaboration with other actors publishes a collection of alternative voices for peace including religious actors in Russia and Ukraine. There is a significant number of joint peace initiatives by Israeli and Palestinian civil society actors, but they are hardly heard in mainstream international media, peace dialogues and foreign policy. There is a need to listen more carefully to the voices of initiatives such as “Women Wage Peace”, “Parents Circle”, “Combatants for Peace”. We also need channels of communication about the key contributions of faith actors since prejudices, misinformation through fake news, anti-religious hate speech and deliberate misuse of religion for political and economic purposes is a wide spread phenomena.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4) UN Summit for the Future and the potential for more visibility of faith partners**

Steps have been taken to prepare for a major Summit for the Future of the UN on 22-23 September 2024 (led by Germany and Namibia) to bring in new life into the multilateral system and the 2030 Agenda. While the Summit for the Future has no specific window for the role of faith partners, at least three of its themes are related to PaRD’s working areas:

- Agree on a new agenda for peace (9)
- Transform education (10)
- Agree on a vision of digital technology (5) (which includes the issues on ethics, a major field for religious actors)<sup>10</sup>

The zero draft document for the “Pact for the Future” of the Future Summit, released on 26 January 24, is important here. The draft serves as a starting point for this year’s intergovernmental deliberations. The goal is to adopt an ambitious, concise, and action-oriented pact. The draft covers critical areas such as sustainable development, international peace and security, and financing for development. Stakeholders, including civil society, have provided inputs to shape this foundational document. But FBOs were not systematically invited to provide inputs, for instance via PaRD. Neither in the section on “Peace and International Security” (No 2) nor in the sections on “Youth and Future Generations” (No 4) and “Transforming Global Governance (No 5) the significant role of religious

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<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/faith-groups-commemorate-united-nations-75th-anniversary-look-to-the-future>

<sup>8</sup> Religionen, Diplomatie und Frieden. Eine Handreichung für die deutschen Auslandvertretungen, FEST Institut für Interdisziplinäre Forschung, Heidelberg Oktober 2023; in: <https://religionen-diplomatie-frieden.de/>

<sup>9</sup> Gerald T. FitzGerald, Geoge Mason University: Mapping Anti-Muslim Discrimination and Information Manipulation, and its Impact on Humanitarian Aid and Development, in: <https://jiliflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Fitzgerald-WhitePaper2.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future#:~:text=The%20Summit%20of%20the%20Future%20is%20a%20once%20in%20a%20lifetime,towards%20a%20reinvigorated%20multilateral%20system>

communities is referred to.<sup>11</sup> Faith actors therefore need to get proactively involved in such international processes, and in alliances such as PaRD these issues ought to be prioritized.<sup>12</sup>

### **5) Increasing need for cooperating with religious actors, but decreasing financial support**

Public and state human resources and funding for projects working with faith actors including FBOs is diminishing as we can see in Norway, Switzerland and elsewhere. The massive growth in expenditure for military spending is leading to major cuts in development budgets. This also affects civil society and faith actors in development cooperation. Rather than lamenting or accusing others, creative efforts and new thinking is needed to attract new sources of funding and establishing new alliances for in-kind and financial support. At the same time, there is a need to increase advocacy work at the UN level, because the conviction that the SDGs can only be reached with and not without faith actors needs to be complemented by tangible support and not only by mere rhetoric.

### **6) Diversified actors in the field of religion and development**

In Guatemala a public protest of Indigenous groups from Maja tradition pressed for the overcoming of extractive exploitation of nature. They also supported the inauguration of the new president Bernardo Arevalo, who is a campaigner against corruption, and who has been discriminated by the conservative political Christian establishment according to Indigenous representatives.<sup>13</sup> Such resistance against extractive exploitation of natural resources might lead to a resurgence of indigenous traditions. Therefore, it is likely that the perspectives and the wisdom of Indigenous traditions in connection to environmental protection but also decolonialisation will receive higher global attention.

What needs to be considered at policy and operational level when we want to work more closely with Indigenous peoples and other new partners in the nexus of religion and development?<sup>14</sup> What needs to be reflected when a diversification of cooperation partners in the field of religion and development, an already complex and heterogeneous sphere, is envisaged?<sup>15</sup> Partnerships like PaRD need to be cautious in order to adhere to its unique mandate, values and human-rights standards, and cooperation criteria, while maintaining openness and inclusivity at the same time.

As a final remark, let me emphasise that religious actors foremost need to live up to their potential and deliver what they have promised. Only then, they will be regarded as convincing partners in the sphere of ethics, mediation, and sustainable development.

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<sup>11</sup> See: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-co-facilitators-zero-draft\\_pact-for-the-future.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-co-facilitators-zero-draft_pact-for-the-future.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-co-facilitators-zero-draft\\_pact-for-the-future.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-co-facilitators-zero-draft_pact-for-the-future.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLwYIcT-P5Y>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TM0zXVPemKI>

<sup>14</sup> See Criteria for partners set out in BMZ Strategy from 2016 about “religious communities as partners of development cooperation”, Section 3.1., page 11ff, in: <https://www.bmz.de/resource/blob/23744/strategiepapier363-religious-communities-as-partners-for-development-cooperation.pdf>; see also survey on experiences of UN organizations with indigenous people’s organizations: Partnering with Indigenous Peoples. Experiences and Practises, in: <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/LibraryDocuments/partnering-with-ips.pdf>; see also Bericht der Bundesregierung zur Lage der Religionsfreiheit November 2023 (Schwabe Bericht) mit dem Hauptkapitel 1: Indigene Völker und ihr Recht auf Religionsfreiheit, in: <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/095/2009580.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Just to name the different and very varied groupings of Pentecostal, Evangelical and Independent or Transnational Mega-Churches, see on the changing religious landscapes: Gina A. Zurlo: Global Christianity: A Guide to the World’s Largest Religion from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe (Zondervan Academic, September 2022)