

THE INVISIBLE WORLDS OF RELIGION AND ECONOMY

Ladies and gentlemen,

Twelve years ago I accepted my Chair at ISS with an inaugural lecture entitled *Rats, Cockroaches and People Like Us*, in which I discussed the relation between people's views of humanity and actual human rights. In it I made a plea for an intelligent use of the wide range of religious and spiritual resources available to people all over the world for the sake of human rights. In subsequent years I have expanded this argument by advocating the inclusion of religious resources for development in the broadest sense. Twelve years later it seems that, at least in the Netherlands, this remains a controversial proposal, especially in view of the great changes in the political climate at home and abroad since the dramatic events in 2001.

Yet, I take this last opportunity to renew my plea. This time it is in the face of a global financial crisis that necessitates all of us to rethink some of our fundamental assumptions about the world and the way it is governed. Or, to be more precise, the *forces* that are *believed* to govern it. While religious believers generally ascribe significant power in this regard to spiritual entities of some sort - whether gods, deities, spirits or other invisible entities -, secular believers too tend to ascribe power to invisible forces, such as those often referred to as market forces or, most notably, to the invisible entity known as capital (not to be confused with money or with physical objects such as land or buildings, as these are only the form in which capital becomes visible). In both cases - religious and secular - these invisible forces are believed to affect our material world.

Before anybody becomes disturbed by this comparison, let me make clear that I am not claiming that the invisible forces that are supposedly governing our world - whether conceived of as economic or spiritual in nature - are similar in every respect. What I am suggesting is that in both cases we are dealing with a belief in transcendental agencies that manifest themselves in ways that vary according to the history and culture of a given society. Both emanate from particular ways of viewing the world, in the one case expressed in religious terms, in the other, in economic terms. In case of the latter, modern government and business are based on the assumption that the invisible entity called capital can (in principle) be accessed by

anybody, though at the highest level, access is mediated through a range of techniques operated by specialists such as bankers and economists, in the same way as for religious believers access to the transcendental is mediated by religious experts such as priests and theologians, who have their own techniques. In modern societies, we may say, economists have replaced theologians as the people who predict and calculate the future, or claim they can do so.

I am making these points in order to introduce some thought-provoking ideas about things that are normally not considered in the same light. It may help us to understand the argument I have consistently been making during my years at ISS about the need to consider religion as a relevant factor in the development process. Many people in the world, I have repeatedly argued, attach great value to religion as a positive resource in their lives, that both furthers their individual progress and helps them to build society. [For the sake of clarity, let me state once more what I mean by the term ‘religion’, namely a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, that is home to spiritual entities deemed to have effective powers over the material world (a working definition that I have used throughout my work at ISS)]. At the point where people’s individual and social interests meet we find that religion becomes a powerful resource, a force that can be channelled for constructive purposes also by development agents. As I have emphasised in the past, there is no reason (other than ignorance or prejudice) for anybody working to improve living standards around the world to ignore one important human resource if and when it is available.

The question we have to ask ourselves is how to unlock this religious potential. Here, too, a comparison between the invisible forces of religion and those of economy may illustrate the point. In the same way as the invisible force called ‘capital’ constitutes a *potentiality* rather than a visible reality in human society and can only be realized through a set of interrelated ideas, practices and institutions, so do the invisible forces inherent in religion constitute a human potentiality that can be realized through a coherent set of ideas, practices and institutions, be it of a different nature. In both cases the question is how to turn potentiality into reality, or: how to make the invisible visible in such a way as to further development. In the case of religion, I have sometimes referred to this as a form of spiritual empowerment.

I will be the first to admit that this is easier said than done. At the same time it is fair to say that particularly in development circles hardly any academic research is done to explore people's religious potential for development. But the need to do this is more pressing than ever, given the state of the world today. Religion, I have consistently argued, in whatever form it manifests itself, and irrespective of whether we like it or not, constitutes a social and a political fact. Today we have examined one facet of this, namely the economic implications of a religious worldview (in this case notably Islam) and the challenges that emerge from such a worldview for development financing. We have done so at the backdrop of a financial crisis which shows every sign of a moral crisis and requires a new debate on ethics in economic affairs. As evidence for this I may cite a global opinion poll on values and ethics carried out by the World Economic Forum following the crisis of 2008. It showed that a majority of respondents – over two-thirds – considered the economic crisis to be also a crisis of ethics and values. In general, respondents believed that business of any sort should be more values-driven. It also showed that in economies in different parts of the world, such as those of the United States, Saudi Arabia and South Africa, religion and faith are the prime drivers of values. Although religion does not have a monopoly in this field, the fact that many people in the world derive their values primarily from their religion is something for us to reckon with. Even the government of China, a rising power in world affairs, has taken note of this fact and adapted its policies accordingly. Interestingly, in view of our topic this afternoon, China recently awarded its first Islamic banking licence to accommodate its more than 80 million Muslim population, and reportedly a number of big conventional banks in China are currently considering how they can create Shariah compliant products for their clients.

It seems to me that all this makes it even more urgent for us to try and understand religious worldviews, especially in places singled out for development. Even if not wholeheartedly, important financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF are getting the message that they need to allow more space for the religious or spiritual dimension of life in order to be effective in development. In Europe, too, there are countries that are trying to feel their way towards a new policy in this regard. The same applies to academic institutions, some of which have now – cautiously - included religion as a subject matter in their development studies curriculum. Unfortunately ISS is not (yet) one of them. In my view, as a leading institute for

development studies that receives students from all over the world, most of whom come from societies where a religious worldview is prevalent, ISS cannot afford to ignore the subject and exclude it from its curriculum. Analysing the role of religion in the development process and help release religion's constructive potential seems to me an obvious task at hand. For too long, development experts have attempted to *change* people's outlook of the world, rather than to *build* on it. The latter is what all of us should be doing.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank you for your listening to my final plea - at least here at ISS - to develop an open mind in order to explore the religious potential for development, for reasons explained now as in the past. I have immensely enjoyed my time at ISS and I wish to thank all and everyone who has contributed to this. There is a time to come and a time to go, or: all things have their season. I have had my season and leave ISS with a warm heart, wishing it a prosperous future.

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