

**Faith-Based Development Initiatives as ‘Prosperity Religions’?  
Reflections on religion and development.<sup>1</sup>**

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Introduction

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries have been marked by millennial expectations around the fall of the Iron Curtain (1989) and the political unification of the world; around the rise of the ‘casino capitalism’ of the Asian financial crisis, the 1990s Internet bubble, the global hedge funds, and ‘glocal’ pyramid schemes; around the re-emergence of religion as a global force, *vide* the spread of Islamic and Christian fundamentalisms; and around development cooperation, in the form of the Millennium (sic!) Development Goals.<sup>3</sup> When Jean and John Comaroff coined the term ‘millennial capitalism’ to denote the unpredictable, often religious and quasi-magical forms of wealth accumulation in our re-enchanting world, the U.N., G8 plus, Bono and Geldof were busy debating the Millennium Development Goals that were supposed to make poverty history.

In a context of waxing and waning interest in development cooperation and of a growing disenchantment concerning the promises of development, and in a context of a growing local, transnational and international importance of religious affiliations, in this paper I propose to explore the possible connections between religion and development by reflecting on development as desire, both on the part of the *developers* (development institutions and agents) and *developpees* (‘target groups’); and as a religious project in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is partly based on my ‘Development cooperation as quasi-religious conversion,’ in: Oscar Salemink, Anton van Harskamp, Ananta Kumar Giri (eds.), *The Development of Religion, the Religion of Development*. Delft 2004: Eburon, pp. 121-130, for which I benefited from Anton van Harskamp’s insightful suggestions. The current paper has been inspired by many discussions and joint work with Philip Quarles van Ufford in the Agora and EIDOS arenas, as well as with other members in those for a and with Ananta Kumar Giri. I would like to thank all of them for their comments. All mistakes in this paper, however, are mine only.

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/> or <http://www.developmentgoals.org/>.

*telos* as well as method – i.e. conversion and discipline, partly based on my ethnographic research in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> I shall argue that the Millennium Development Goals can be interpreted as a millenarian myth constituting the ultimate sacralization of the culture of neoliberalism.

Now if development can be considered a secular religion and hence as a quasi-religious project preaching that the gospel of prosperity is within reach for all, then what does the discourse and practice of faith-based development tell us? Can a transcendental and this-worldly *telos* and their concomitant practices be combined? I shall argue that in the era of millennial capitalism this is only possible through the sacralization of (secular) development on the one hand, and by ‘secularizing’ religious practice and ethic as ‘prosperity religions’ with a materialist this-worldly calling. The question whether the rapprochement between religion and development constitutes a crisis or a new opportunity, I shall answer by arguing that their rapprochement assumes a simultaneous crisis in development *and* religion.

### A critical history of development

Historically, the concept of ‘development’ has had varying meanings, in changing historical contexts, and propelled by changing visions of its *telos* – i.e. the state of being that development ideally should lead to. At the end of World War II the word ‘development’ acquired the new meaning of re-building the infrastructure and economy of Europe, as epitomized in the Marshall Plan. Development concerned – and was directed at – Europe in President Truman’s vision of a brave new postwar world order characterized by the Bretton Woods financial architecture.

With the unfolding of the worldwide Cold War rivalry between the USA and USSR, ‘development’ began to be used in two novel ways. First, it began to be applied to the newly independent, former colonies (including Latin America) rather than ‘Europe’, thus constituting the ‘Third World’ as the site of development. In a reversal of the political geography of development, however, the ‘First World’ (Europe and US) and ‘Second World’ (USSR) became the models of development for others to follow. Second, ‘development’ became an ambiguous and contested concept and practice, tied in with competing political and economic ideologies and geopolitical power games.

While the discourse of development and underdevelopment gave rise to new practices glossed as development assistance or development cooperation, these practices involved various institutional players, like governments, churches, business companies, universities, and of course a wide variety of specialized development cooperation agencies. At the time the *vision* of development seemed to be the establishment a world of material affluence for everybody by technical means, a truly ‘modern’ world. The *mission* of development cooperation was to ‘modernize’ which in practice implied making ‘them’ like ‘us’. As written in Genesis 1:27 NIV:

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<sup>4</sup> This is not the place to define ‘religion’, but for the purpose of this conference we wish to look at religious discourse and practice in terms of visions of (anti-)modernity and of the *telos* of development, motivated by transcendental inspirations.

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

When the geographic focus of the discourse and practice of ‘development’ was shifted from ourselves – in Europe and the West – onto ‘others’ – in the Third World, or now the Global South – the concept of development lost the connotation of re-construction and added moral connotations of modernity and reform, thus resembling a secularized version of earlier missionary activities. In other words, development only acquired missionary and messianic overtones after it was re-oriented from Europe to the Third World. Development interventions were directed at bringing a new ‘gospel’ of technical progress and prosperity for all. Whether the supposed beneficiaries of these good intentions shared this modern secular vision of development was hardly asked or discussed.

The third development period was inaugurated by the neo-liberal turn of Reaganomics and Thatcherism during the 1980s, and crowned by the collapse of the Soviet-dominated Communist Bloc in 1989, rendering the Cold War ideological contestations meaningless. Claiming a world historical victory of market capitalism over real existing socialism, Francis Fukuyama announced the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1992) – a situation evoking utopian visions of global peace, order and stability. Development cooperation was redefined as an unfolding of (sacralized) market forces, as epitomized by the structural adjustment programs imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions (WB, IMF) that had historically been established for the postwar reconstruction of Europe. This market ‘fundamentalism’ has been accompanied by seemingly de-politicized, technocratic notions of ‘professionalism’ that reduce political issues to management techniques (accountability, governance, etc.).

In the sixty years that have passed since WW II, expectations have not been met and had to be scaled down causing a severe legitimacy crisis in the field of development cooperation. In spite of the growing economic might of China and India, poverty and hunger in the world are still staggering and even growing in absolute numbers. Perhaps not surprising in a system driven by competition, differentiation and inequality – globally and within countries – have grown dramatically. The technical and organizational techniques that were exported by the Northern countries often did not catch on resulting in many so-called ‘white elephants’. Moreover, wherever rapid economic development has taken off (‘Asian tigers’), the role of classical Northern development cooperation seems to have been negligible. Other factors often seem to have a much bigger impact than development cooperation.

But there are cultural discrepancies too. The ‘secular fundamentalism’ of Western development ideas (adopted by local elites) has become one of the key factors stimulating the rise of (non-Western) ‘religious fundamentalisms’. The latter can be interpreted as modern ways of pursuing alternative, non-secular, non-western ways of development. Often, though certainly not always, they present themselves as straightforwardly anti-Western, causing bewilderment in donor countries. The ‘enchantment’ of development cooperation as a secular conversion to modernity seems to have given way to ‘disenchantment’ over the material results as well as to new forms of ‘enchantment’ in the form of religious vision of modernity – as new *teloi* of development.

## Desire for development

In international development discourse there now seems to be a stalemate between two groups. On the one hand the globalizing universalists, who push through a secular modernization agenda with recourse to the Washington Consensus. Within this group several myths are developed in order to justify this agenda and to safeguard its so-called 'professional' status: the myth of accountability, the myth of 'target-realizability', the myth of mutuality and ownership, and the myth of good intentions and perfect altruism – best symbolized by the (seemingly neutral but almost millennial) Millennium Goals, predicated on a further unfolding of the market.

It is instructive to pause here for a moment and ask who the persons are that populate the institutions advocating what Jean and John Comaroff (2002) have called “millennial capitalism” and the “culture of neoliberalism”. It would be easy to pinpoint disgraced World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz – one of the architects of the War on Terror – as one of those, simply because he failed to live up to the ethical anti-corruption standards that he tried to impose on WB lending practice and therefore on recipient countries. I think it is more instructive to take a look at the 'prophet' of the MDGs, Jeffrey Sachs (2005), and his 'present-day saints' in mass-mediated popular culture: Bono and Bob Geldof.

The twisted role of Jeffrey Sachs and the Harvard Institute for International Development in the selling out of Russia's state assets under Boris Yeltsin has been aptly analyzed by Janine Wedel (1998), anthropologist and professor of public policy at George Mason University. A group of young 'reformist' economists from the US – the Harvard Group - and from Russia – the Chubais Clan – colluded with the mission to 'privatize' Russia's state enterprises as quickly as possible, usually to themselves or their cronies, basically for peanuts. They avoided accountability by alternately assuming central state authority or claiming non-governmental status. The macro-consequences for Russia of this scheme, described by Wedel in a recent ASA conference paper, are well-known: the failure of the 'shock therapy' advocated by the Harvard economists, the overnight emergence of a class of 'oligarchs' (Khodorkovsky, Berezovski, Abramovich) in a Russian economy characterized by casino capitalism, the impoverishment of the population brought out starkest by the rapid reduction of the population and life expectancy. HIID went bankrupt after the 'economic advisors' illegitimately – and for private gain - invested its assets into risky stocks which subsequently collapsed in the 1990s, and the main players were brought to court. Jeffrey Sachs, however, so far escaped prosecution by reinventing himself as special advisor for the UN Secretary General and as main global advocate for the MDGs, basically claiming that the 'end of poverty' is a matter of more money, more technology, more market, and private property. Putting it simplistically, he puts forth a neoliberal vision of a global economy that can provide for all without any real sacrifice on the part of the rich – paradise is just around the corner, we have the tools, knowledge and means; with a bit of effort we will get there.

This 'Sachsy' vision is appealing to those who like to do and be good without sacrificing their own riches. Not just the Western European countries and their leaders, but highly public capitalists like Bill Gates – financed by Microsoft's near-monopoly on personal computer software – and popular celebrities Bono and 'saint Bob' Geldof, with their crusade against poverty and for Africa (see O'Neill 2007). Both popstars have tried to use their celebrity charisma as 'cultural capital' to be converted into popular pressure for political leaders to increase development aid and to relieve debt for poor countries – which typically pay more in interest of debts to western institutions than they receive in aid. Apart from possible ethical motivations and Catholic notions of moral absolutism, they enjoy enhanced charisma – a revived (Geldof) or enhanced (Bono) music career, buttressed by their worldwide fame as 'good people' and the consequent free publicity, moments in the spotlight with political leaders like Clinton, Bush and Blair, participation in Davos. The saintly fame of Bono and Geldof is exceptional in degree only, as many mainstream development institutions recruit celebrities eager to improve their public moral profile as 'ambassadors' for their respective causes. This is, of course, only one tiny example of how the world of development aid and the world of mass-mediated popular culture interact and mutually influence and constitute each other. Much in the same way, my colleague Birgit Meyer shows that popular religion – especially pentecostal religion – and mass-mediated popular culture in Africa mix and merge to create a particular pentecostalite style characteristic of both (Meyer 1998b; 2004; 2006) .

The interconnection between the world of development and the world of mediated popular culture – and in particular the conversion of cultural capital of charismatic celebrities into public interest, political urgency and big bucks – re-packages development aid as a 'charismatic gift' – to borrow Simon Coleman's phrase in his analysis of the Prosperity Gospel (Coleman 1998; 2000; 2004). It is ironic to note that decades after the 'emancipation' of development from its missionary roots and consequent religious overtones, development is again sacralized by the charisma of its celebrity heroes. The charisma of popular heroes does not just sacralize their own status as present-day secular 'saints' but sacralizes the secular practice of development aid, including the MDG's.

For trained anthropologists the mere mention of the word 'gift' opens up a whole can of worms which can be reduced to the concept of 'reciprocity' – which we will return to later. For now it is necessary to mention that besides and beyond the Washington Consensus and the mainstream development industry there are diverse groups that advocate for a more diverse, contextualized, culturally specific concept of development. They might point to a presumed cultural incompatibility of Western techniques and Western ways of thinking with local contexts and aspirations. This extremely diverse category of 'localists', then, may consist of 'anti-globalists' and leftist groups, indigenous rights organizations as well as religious groupings (often labelled fundamentalists) that do not share the modern secular vision of development and refuse to believe in its professional myths. These groups have in common that they do not embrace – or even resist – the neoliberal vision of modernity as the *telos* of development. This tension or even conflict over the *telos* of development is perhaps best illustrated by the various interpretations of 9/11 against this backdrop.

As soon as it happened, September 11 was linked to issues of development and ‘underdevelopment’, with commentators offering a wide variety of – sometimes contradictory – causal explanations and often assuming a connection between global poverty and inequality with fundamentalism. Following Samuel Huntington (1993), the attack and its immediate aftermath were often portrayed as a harbinger of the imminent ‘clash of civilizations’ but which – given the interconnectedness of the world through migration – quickly becomes a “clash within civilizations” (if we may believe Benjamin Barber 2001). With a widespread backlash against (Muslim) immigrants and against multiculturalism, development aid either becomes containment of immigration by reducing the ‘push factors’ for migration, or is seen as the repair of ‘collateral damage’ in the wake of military intervention through humanitarian aid. A related, widespread response was to cast the present global arena as a conflict between (Western) secular Enlightenment rationality on the one hand and religious fundamentalism rooted in putative (Islamic) irrationality on the other.

But these are not equally powerful, competing eschatologies, in the way that Peter Berger in his *Pyramids of Sacrifice* (1976) analyzed the competing capitalist and communist global development endeavors as both partaking in the mythology of modernity:

The myth of growth, and indeed the entire mythology of modernity, derives from the specifically Western tradition of messianism. Ultimately, it represents a secularization of Biblical eschatology. (Berger 1976: 18-19).

It is interesting to note the dated character of this observation, not so much in the reference to the Cold War polarity but in the assumption that Christianity and hence messianism are primarily Western – the global religioscape has changed much since 1976! The point that I wish to make with reference to Berger’s observation is that since 1989 – the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War – this bipolar eschatology expressed by Berger has been replaced by a seemingly unipolar eschatology of modernity, captured by Francis Fukuyama’s notion of the ‘end of history’. While we do not lack possible alternative *teloi*, these are often glossed as religious and traditional, and hence becoming the subject matter of not simply political-economic competition on a global scale, but of the totalizing discipline of modernist conversion. To quote Berger again:

Modernization operates like a gigantic steel hammer, smashing both traditional institutions and traditional structures of meaning. It deprives the individual of the security which, however harsh they may have been, traditional institutions provided for him. It also tends to deprive him of the cosmological security provided by traditional religious world views. (Berger 1976: 23)

Much of what follows will deal with the connection between the “material economy of things and the moral economy of persons” (John and Jean Comaroff 1990: 196) in the context of developments in terms of reform, discipline, desire, and the quasi-religious conversion to modernity. For now I would like to stress that this effort at conversion – “operating like a gigantic steel hammer” – is very deliberate and focused, preferably targeting ‘countries in transition’ which have to be converted from Socialism to capitalism, rooting out the last Cold

War remnants of opposition. In a similar vein one could interpret the present military interventions in Central Asia and the Middle East as disciplinary exercises aimed at spreading liberal democracy, and the market economy – or the culture of neoliberalism: making them like us, recreating them in our image. Much has been said about the evangelical zeal with which this latter project was taken up by the neo-Conservatives in the US, and supported by a Christian-fundamentalist constituency. But this desire to spread this Gospel and root out all evil – President Bush quickly rescinded his initial reference to a ‘crusade’ but the discourse on the ‘axis of evil’ is alive and kicking! – extends to the humanitarian concern for Africa as well. In their public humanitarian concern, Blair, Bono and Geldof assume evangelical qualities when they aim to lift the ‘dark continent’ out of darkness. The question on my mind is whether they are concluding a pact with the devil to achieve that goal – a civilizing mission corrupted and gone astray, as in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Their association with Bush and Sachs does not augur well, in my view.

Their desire for a better world is matched by the desire of the mainstream development institutions to do good. The humanitarian *telos* of combating poverty amounts to a political economy of good intentions, best brought out on a global scale in the MDG’s which are presented as neutral, technical targets. The goals are couched in benign terms that no sane person would object to (eradicate extreme hunger and poverty, achieve universal primary education, etc.) but their implementation will be highly politicized. The way the eighth and last MDG (‘develop a global partnership for development’) is operationalized is already much more contentious – certainly if taken seriously by the northern countries. The global agreement of the MDG’s – as well as myriad other global development conventions – obscures the neoliberal economic orthodoxy that rules the world since Reaganomics and Thatcherism became the dominant paradigms. The absence of any analysis of the political economy of global inequality, however, makes it easy for celebrities to realize their desire for doing good and to subscribe to the MDGs as goodwill ambassadors. It is equally easy but equally gratuitous for political leaders to endorse them since there is no ‘sacrifice’ involved – no mention of a competitive economic system that produces both wealth and poverty. If no morally sane person could object to the MDGs, no mentally sane person could really expect that that the MDGs would be met. The myopic assumption that poverty can be reduced to a financial issue of global philanthropy is only matched by naive belief that the financial commitments made would be honored. So much is already clear on all fronts.

While the cause of advancing the MDGs by the rich and famous on this planet – pop stars, actors and models, politicians and captains of industry – may be gratuitous in the most literal sense of the word, their commitment of their cultural capital – celebrity – can itself be seen as a ‘charismatic gift’. The lack of substance of their gift and the lack of actual results only match the de-politicized nature of their engagement. In spite of all talk about good governance and accountability, what matters in the political economy of good intentions is their publicly professed desire to do good, for the eye of the world to see. They sacralize the goals, but not the action, and yet the mainstream development organizations are only too eager to bask in this celebrity charisma. Seen from this angle, development cooperation becomes a performance and

spectacle driven by the desire to show good intentions – a perfect example of what Ronald Inglehart yesterday called the “values of self-expression” of post-industrial society.<sup>5</sup>

In the following I would like to draw attention to some of the cultural aspects of development cooperation, which are closely connected to the politics and economics of development. I would like to suggest some elements for a cultural critique of development – or better: of the culturalization of development. In the next section I shall briefly discuss some theories that connect economic development to culture, and more in particular to religion, or to connect the material economy of things with the moral economy of persons.

### Capitalist *genie* from a Calvinist bottle?

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the adoption of market reforms in China, what we mean when we speak of development actually is capitalist development, since there does not seem to be a viable, attractive alternative. Pockets of other economic systems barely survive. Subsistence economies are shrinking, and are progressively integrated into national states and embedded by globalizing economic forces. However, in different historical periods some regions have been markedly more prone to capitalist development than others. The famous Weberian thesis on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* – explaining how a capitalist mentality took root in Calvinist Northwest Europe and North America in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries – was embedded in an encompassing comparative treatise on other world religions that – in Max Weber’s eyes – posed obstacles to the emergence of a capitalist system (Weber 1976; Keyes 2002, Meyer 2006). Ever since Max Weber’s study it is almost a truism to state that capitalism and religion as moral systems are interconnected (Keyes 2002; John and John Comaroff 1990). Recent capitalist success stories in other parts of the world were attributed to ‘neo-Calvinist’ versions of local religions. The ‘Asian Values’ debate which sought to connect the performance of the Asian miracle economies to a ‘neo-Confucian’ ethic is a case in point (Pertierra 1999), but also shows clearly that the nature of the interconnections is not undisputed.

However, at the end of *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber states clearly that the Calvinist ethic was only instrumental in the initial phase of capitalist development, claiming that once established, the capitalist mode of production would quickly or gradually out-compete other economic systems and practices. This is a process that we can observe today, along with another phenomenon: the proliferation of religious faith and practices that seem more in line with the realities and requirements of present-day capitalism, or that at least try to make sense of this world. This ‘sense-making’ may involve a negative or positive interpretation of capitalist exchange. Already in 1980 Michael Taussig in *The devil and commodity fetishism in south America* drew attention to the observed phenomenon that certain groups in Latin America associated capitalist exchange and accumulation with the work of the devil. With reference to Africa there is a growing body of

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald Inglehart’s keynote address, ‘The intertwining trajectories of religion and economic development’, VU Universiyt Amsterdam, June 14, 2007.

anthropological literature on the interconnections between capitalism and modernity on the one hand, and witchcraft, accusations of witchcraft and occultism on the other hand (Geschiere 1997; Meyer 1998a; Meyer & Pels 2003). A positive interpretation of capitalist relationships may be found in the spread of Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches around the world, in particular those churches that preach the ‘prosperity gospel’ (Coleman 1998; 2000; Comaroff & Comaroff 2000; Meyer 2006), but I would also like to point to the article ‘New mutations of the Protestant ethic among Latin American Pentostals’ by Bernice Martin (1995). Beyond Christianity we see the flourishing of highly ‘transactional’ forms of spirit mediumship mimicking capitalist transactions in the context of various religious traditions in Asia, in particular Korea (Kendall 1996), China (Weller 2000; Shahar & Weller 1996), Thailand (Pattana Kitiarsa 2005; 2007) and Vietnam (Philip Taylor 2004; Lê Hồng Lý 2007; Salemink 2007a; n.p.).

By and large, this body of work does not repeat the Weberian thesis which explains the emergence of a capitalist spirit in the historical context of the *emergence* of a capitalist mode of production, *not* its subsequent spread around the world. Rather, it reverses the Weberian thesis by assuming that a particular religious ethic, religious forms, or certain interpretations of a religious text, emerge in a context where capitalism is becoming or has become dominant. In other words, the causality in the relationship is reversed, as one can see in much of the contemporary theorizing on religious – especially Protestant – conversion worldwide which tends to interpret conversion to Christianity or any other world religion as a conversion to modernity (Hefner 1993; 1998; Van der Veer 1996; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991), but the mechanics of that relationship are not yet fully understood. Oftentimes, reference is made to the cultural contradictions of capitalism between the realms of production and consumption (Bell 1996), cultural incompatibility (Salemink 1997) or lifeworld crisis (Keyes 1996; Keyes et al. 1994), but the moral connections between capitalism and religion remain somewhat obscure. For this reason I find it illuminating to look at a somewhat obscure fragment of writing by Walter Benjamin, published posthumously.

In this interesting fragment probably dating from 1921, Walter Benjamin makes a case for regarding capitalism not just as conditioned by religion, but *as* a religion requiring uninterrupted worship that creates debt::

Capitalism is probably the first example of a cult that does not absolve but creates guilt/debt [*ist verschuldend*].<sup>6</sup> Here lies the religious system in the free fall [*Sturz*] of a monstrous movement. An enormous feeling of guilt/indebtedness [*Schuld*] that cannot be absolved embraces the cult – not to reconcile the debt/guilt this way but to make it universal and hammer it into the consciousness... (Benjamin 1985: 100).

This thesis has recently been picked up and elaborated by Uwe Steiner (1998), Christoph Deutschmann (2001), and Birgit Meyer (2006). Benjamin describes capitalism as an essentially religious phenomenon characterized by its cultic nature, the absence of dogma, and the uninterrupted condition of worship. As a cult, it creates indebtedness rather than absolution, and

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<sup>6</sup> The German word *Schuld* has both meanings – of (moral) guilt and of (financial) debt.

it has the tendency to make this indebtedness universal (Benjamin 1985: 100). Although Benjamin does not refer to this aspect of Marx' analysis, the cultic aspect of commodity fetishism in *Das Kapital* [*Capital*] seems a prelude to Benjamin's analysis. Deutschmann emphasizes the creative destruction of capital growth, necessitating the altercation of destabilization and re-stabilization and – hence – the continuous need for new hunting grounds, new myths, and new promises: the religious promise of absolute wealth (Deutschmann 2001).

It is pertinent to return here to our earlier mention of the charismatic gift. In *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss (1990) proposed a theory of exchange that 1) is characterized by reciprocity, brought out in the triad Give – Receive – Return; and 2) is embedded in social and cultural valuations. In other words, in many cultural contexts exchange and reciprocity do not only or primarily serve economic, but social and cultural purposes. Accepting a gift creates a moral debt which can only be redeemed by a reciprocal return gift – immediate or delayed, direct or indirect. (Please note the financial and moral/religious connotations of the words *Schuld* (debt/guilt) and redemption.) When Karl Marx wrote about commodity fetishism, he analyzed the commodity not just as a material object but as the embodiment of labor and of unequal exchange. Not only was the unequal exchange hidden from view by the materiality of the object, but the exchange involved was presented as primarily economic – devoid of moral, social, cultural content. I read the quote by Walter Benjamin as saying a couple of things, namely that capitalist exchange breaks the cycle of reciprocity and hence creates indebtedness, but also that this exchange spreads inexorably, and that the debt created by this “monstrous movement” has a moral aspect of guilt as well.

This quotation speaks of the universalization of capitalism – a process subsumed in the present-day concept of globalization – but, given the religious nature of capitalism, also implies conversion at an individual level. This brings us back to Max Weber who connected the Protestant *ethic* with the *spirit* of capitalism – both moral categories with behavioral implications. Benjamin suggests a collusion between capitalism and religion which goes far beyond Weber's theory of Protestantism as creating the ideological conditions for the emergence of capitalist calculus. My point here is that the “conversion to capitalism” (cf. Taylor 2001: 61; see also Van der Veer 1996) has moral dimensions which find their way in myriad policies and practices, and which extend into various domains of life, including the most private ones. In their seminal work on Christian conversion in South Africa, Jean and John Comaroff describe Christian conversion during colonial times as a project of comprehensive reform – “a revolution in the habits of the people” that extended beyond the religious domain aiming at a different “kind of being and consciousness” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 199). Christian conversion instilled “a time sense and social self-control well-suited to the disciplinary demands of the ascendant industrial order” (Hefner 1998: 88). Conversion, then, was “a process involving the removal of difference and distinction [and the] assimilat[ion] into the moral economy of civilized man” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 244).

Other contemporary analysts of religion and capitalism have independently from Benjamin noticed the same similarity. It almost seems that for some, religion, market and development become almost interchangeable. In an introduction to a volume on the connections between

religion and development, Quarles van Ufford and Schoffeleers (1988) note the simultaneous changes in the parallel discourses of religion and development, and contend that development as concept and as a social movement can be studied as a quasi-religious phenomenon. In an essay on religious revival in Southeast Asia, Bernhard Dahm (1996: 46) notes that “capitalist economy, materialism and consumerism came to Thailand in a package as if it were a new religion” – thus posing a challenge to Thailand’s official religion, Buddhism. In an article on the globalization of religious markets focusing on Malaysia, Raymond Lee observes that secularization turns religion into an individual choice, to be catered to by competing religious institutions providing religious services in a globalizing religious market (Lee 1993: 35-61; see also Hefner 1998: 87). In other words, whereas capitalism itself takes the shape of a religion, religious beliefs are marketed according to capitalist principles. And needless to say, like other religions, capitalism itself is marketed as well. In its quasi-religious promise of ‘absolute wealth’, Benjamin’s notion of capitalism as religion foreshadows later analyses of consumerism and of the consumption ethic as the defining cultural feature of late capitalist or (post)modern society (Baudrillard 1975; Bell 1996 [1976]; Bocock 1993; Slater 1997); and the notion of millennial capitalism proposed by the Comaroffs (2000).

#### Pathways of Conversion: A case study<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere I have analyzed recent developments in the region where I have done my doctoral research – Vietnam’s Central Highlands – in terms of ethnicization and nation-building; socialist construction and capitalist integration (Salemink 2002; 2003). Lacking the space to venture into much ethnographic detail here, I propose to analyze that situation by using Walter Benjamin’s notion of capitalism *as* religion, and consequently of capitalist development as conversion. After a period of socialist collectivism, that region has witnessed rapid capitalist development since the introduction of market reforms in the late 1980s, with dire consequences for the indigenous ethnic minority groups who regard the region as their ancestral domain. I would suggest that the religious concept of conversion holds currency through its application to capitalist transformation, showing the comprehensive character of social and cultural transformation as a project of deliberate reform. To put it differently, I shall briefly indicate recent developments in Vietnam’s Central Highlands in terms of a program of *multidimensional* conversion of the physical environment; of the economic system; of the religious beliefs and practices; and of subjectivity. I would submit that Vietnam is an interesting case in point because the capitalist market reform conversion happened quite recently there, and because it is a global donor darling because of its overall economic success, contributing fuel to World Bank claims that its recipe works best.

After the war years of resettlement and defoliation, socialist construction brought further resettlement in the name of modernity. However, present-day market reforms bring changes in

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<sup>7</sup> This section is adapted from Salemink (2004), and largely based on Salemink (2000; 2002; 2003; 2006a; 2006b; 2007b).

the form of massive in-migration of mostly ethnic Vietnamese lowlanders who clear land to set up coffee plantations (now being diversified to include tea, pepper, rubber, cocoa, cashew) in tracts of forest, savannah or in old swidden fields. At the same time, rivers valleys are used for hydropower projects, while remaining forests with economic or ecological value are designated as national parks, nature reserves or protected forests. In other words, from a situation of more or less balanced rotational swidden cultivation embedded in managed forests, a massive *environmental conversion* has changed the face of the landscape and the nature of the natural resources through deforestation, zoning and exploitation of natural resources.

From a marginal region in 1975, with a majority of the (indigenous) population engaging in subsistence farming through clan- or village-based rotational swidden cultivation and some trade, by 2000 the Central Highlands are fully integrated into the world market as a major cash-crop producing region. Out of the blue it became the world's second coffee producing region, saturating the global coffee market with robusta coffee and causing a worldwide slump in coffee prices in the 1990s. Also in rubber, pepper and cashew, Vietnam's Central Highlands are among the world's top three producers. From a 'remote area' it has become a hotspot of globalization in only ten years time. This complete *economic conversion* is predicated on concepts of private land ownership, on capital inputs, on technical know-how and on market access and individual 'cleverness' which are at odds with traditional subsistence-oriented agricultural practices predicated on collective – or at least communal – arrangements among the indigenous Highlanders. More importantly, it is predicated on the labor of recent in-migrants from the lowlands of Vietnam. Whereas some lowlander in-migrants have become *nouveaux riches* conspicuously showing off their wealth with palace-like houses and expensive consumer items (and others have become bankrupt entrepreneurs in adverse market conditions), many indigenous communities and (extended) families have no use for the official division in forest land and agricultural land (a useless distinction for swidden cultivators). Nor does the concept of private land ownership (pushed through in a donor-backed land allocation program) hold much promise for most Highlanders, because the plots are too small for subsistence farming. They often lack the capital and knowledge to invest in cash-crops with long-term return – hence the frequent sale of official land titles by Highlanders who then move deeper into the forest or become economically dependent on their in-migrant neighbors (Salemink 2000). In this 'man-made world' (Inglehart yesterday) Central Highlanders lost their assets and have been by and large impoverished; and poverty is no longer shared, but individualized and culturalized, as if it were an attribute of them: they are increasingly blamed themselves for their poverty and 'backwardness' – indeed, their lack of 'modernity'.<sup>8</sup>

Since 1975, many Highlanders have abandoned their traditional community religions (often glossed as 'animist') which were highly localized in the sense that deities and spirits often housed

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<sup>8</sup> This section is, of course, a generalization for the situation tends to vary according to locality and ethnic group. However, the occurrence of widespread unrest in February 2001 and April 2004 over land ownership and religious freedom – severely repressed by the Vietnamese authorities and triggering a flow of refugees to neighboring countries – confirms this general analysis.

in specific sites (mountains, rivers, forest groves, single trees or stones) in a sacralization of the physical environment. With the conversion of the physical environment and its appropriation by outsiders without respect for its sacred nature, this localized religion gradually lost its sacrality and significance. At the same time, changes in agricultural practices and in the (ethnic) composition of the population rendered rituals progressively meaningless. On top of that, many rituals simply became too time- and resource-intensive, given the general environmental degradation and the economic impoverishment of the population. Faced with increasingly meaningless and burdensome rituals, many Highlanders have abandoned their traditional religion and adopted a new one: Christianity. Introduced and propagated without much success by American evangelical missionaries before 1975, evangelical Protestantism has become the existential safe-haven of the majority of the Highlanders since the capitalist reforms in the 1990s. This massive *religious conversion* to a creed which sets them apart from the ethnic 'Viêt' lowlanders sacralizes a new lifestyle imposed by the exigencies of capitalist development – austerity, moderation, frugality, thrift, calculus, and individual responsibility – under the auspices of transnational modernity. It is in that sense a conversion to modernity (Van der Veer 1996) in a world with multiple modernities (Hefner 1993; 1998) that – although constantly shifting in meaning, from colonial to Socialist to capitalist to Protestant – is constant in its representation as inescapable progress (Webb Keane 2006).

The last type of conversion, then, concerns the reverse Weberian connection between economic change and subjectivity – or consciousness / ethos. During the 'collectivist' period of 'Socialist construction' in reunified Vietnam (1975-1985), the Communist Party attempted to create 'New Socialist Man' who would be different from 'Traditional Man' in the sense that the latter's loyalties lay with the family, local group and class, whereas New Socialist Man would widen his horizon, subject his own desires to the goals of the State, and selflessly work to fulfill these goals. The market reforms triggered the demise of 'New Socialist Man' and provoked the rise of a new type of person whom we might call 'New Capitalist Man' characterized by – what Daniel Bell (1996) calls – the 'cultural contradictions of capitalism'. In the realm of production capitalism puts a premium on (Weberian) frugality, calculus, and deferral of gratification. On the other hand, in the realm of consumption capitalism promises immediate gratification of social, cultural and economic desires (Bell 1996: 54-76). In other words, capitalist culture thrives on the promise of absolute wealth and the hedonistic fulfillment of desire – the promise of finding paradise in consumption.

Most 'orthodox' religions (that Ronald Inglehart was speaking about yesterday) hold out a promise of entering paradise in the afterlife, after heeding the religious prescriptions and proscriptions in a this-worldly life of suffering. The secular religion of Communism does not situate paradise in the 'other world' but promises a this-worldly workers' and peasants' paradise, predicated on a process of radical social and personal reform often glossed as 'revolution'. Like Communism, capitalism holds out the promise of an earthly paradise – or utopia, but through consumption rather than production. Given their impoverishment and presumed backwardness, consumerism is not a concept that one would easily associate with Vietnam's Central Highlanders. Yet, with the integration into the global market Highlanders, too, are confronted

with the imagery of wealth and consumption through the mass media, advertisement, tourism, and conspicuous lifestyles of neighbors. They are now inescapably confronted with a new vision of capitalist modernity – of ‘casino capitalism’ (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 2000), held up as a paradise in the making through consumption. I have never encountered anyone in Vietnam or elsewhere who did not wish to partake in the promises of material consumption, except for religious reasons (in the narrow sense).

In that sense, ‘post-industrial’ capitalist development is driven by economic demand, by consumption, and hence by desire for goods, images, lifestyles – in a political economy of desire that works at a personal level and simultaneously at a global level. But in order to manage, fuel and fulfill that desire, capitalism – like transcendental religions such as Buddhism or Christianity and like secular religions such as Communism – requires a project of *quasi-religious, personal conversion* of the reverse Weberian type. On a personal level, capitalist reforms are aimed at instilling a frugal, calculating and individualistic mentality – or, in the Vietnamese Central Highlands, turning clan-based and community-oriented subsistence farmers into individualistic agricultural entrepreneurs in the so-called ‘household economy’ of ‘cultural families’ propagated by the State. Whether they continue to be farmers or day-wagers, they will be dependent on the market for their survival and thus have to conform to the exigencies of the market.

Like the other conversions mentioned above, this latter conversion of subjectivity is not just a voluntary act of free will, but instead involves a dual movement of attraction and attrition. The attraction of capitalism is easy to understand, as more than any other economic system it holds out the promise of wealth, visible in the cultural goods and even tangible in the material goods that are permeating the Central Highlands just like any other region that is integrated into the globalizing world economy. People grow coffee not because they love to drink coffee, but because they want to get rich selling it. Here the attrition comes in, as not everybody has the knowledge, resources or networks to grow coffee or to get rich selling it. Worse, people risk losing everything through bankruptcy – as thousands of coffee farmers around the world experienced during the coffee glut of the late 1990s; people risk losing their land through its commoditization as (salable) private property; people lose their land and access to resources through expropriation, dispossession and enclosures – as happened in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain and – as a profound historical irony – in contemporary Vietnam, as a prelude to proletarianization (cf. Marx 1981: 744-761). Here, Walter Benjamin’s notion of *Verschuldung* – containing both financial and moral connotations – renders it possible to understand the almost intrinsic need for universalization of capitalism as a cult, not in global terms but in specific places like Vietnam’s Central Highlands. In the market-economic context, Highlanders become financially indebted and lose their main asset – land – in a process of (in Marxian terms) ‘primitive accumulation’ and proletarianization through enclosures. At the same time, this process of financial *Verschuldung* doubles as moral *Verschuldung*, because the inability to observe their traditional community rituals leads to religious and moral guilt. In spite of World Bank professions of good intention, the market, operating according to principles of ‘a-moral’ competition, differentiates.

As a footnote in yesterday's discussion I would like to add the following. In the Vietnamese context, these Central Highlanders may be Christian but they are seen as exotic. They are faring far worse than the majority ethnic Vietnamese in the cities and lowlands, and nowadays in the highlands as well, who might be Buddhists, Taoists, Confucianists, ancestor worshipers. What is interesting of late is the growing phenomenon of spirit mediumship of a highly transactional nature, in which the pantheon of deities mirrors this world, and through which money and objects are sacralized: a highly capitalist religion that reflects the new capitalist subjectivity as consumers, and their anxiety as traders.<sup>9</sup>

### Development as conversion

Development cooperation has often been regarded as promoting capitalist development on a macro-level. As in other 'countries in transition' (from Socialism to capitalism), much development aid is aimed at reform: Market reform for removing barriers to trade and investment; institutional reform for improving governance; capacity development for dealing with complex issues; financial and banking reform for enhancing financial credibility. Guided by the 'Washington Consensus', development aid is provided and coordinated by multilateral donors like the World Bank, IMF, Regional Development Banks and the UN system, along with numerous large and small bilateral and non-governmental donors.

At a micro-level, however, reform takes place as well, as the combined effects of development interventions – glossed as capitalist development – promote the kind of conversion of subjectivities as described above. It is easy to understand why the scriptural world religions promote literacy, if not as an instrument for religious propagation. Similarly, the promotion of literacy as a 'secular' development effort is not neutral either. Formal education fosters the skills that a child needs to succeed as a cash-crop farmer, an entrepreneur or a laborer later in life; but it takes away from the local knowledge and skills that a child would need to survive as a subsistence swidden farmer, a gatherer and hunter. In the same vein, rational health care provided in clinics and health stations competes with local medicine and spiritual comfort provided by shamans and midwives, and thus contributes to the disenchantment of the world (in the Weberian sense) and the de-sacralization of the social and natural environment. Even so-called Community-based Natural Resource Management projects are predicated on the dispossession and zoning of land and resources, which communities can then 'protect' for a fee – perhaps to protect the tress planted on the land that once was theirs in one of the carbon sequestration schemes to compensate for carbondioxide emissions from planes. These development instruments are not neutral, but contribute to the demise of strong, localized communities and to the reform of people at an individual level – New Capitalist Men. Development is part and parcel of the multi-dimensional conversion sketched above – along different tracks and ultimately involving a quasi-religious moral conversion to a capitalist ethos.

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<sup>9</sup> There is more to say about this in terms of Ronald Inglehart's and Scott Thomas' insecurity thesis, if one brings ontological insecurity into the fray along with the characterization of post-industrial society as a society producing consumer rather than producer subjectivities (see Sennett 1996; Bell 1996; Slater 1997).

On a global scale, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) are not neutral either. The goals are couched in benign terms that no sane and moral person would object to (eradicate extreme hunger and poverty, achieve universal primary education, etc.) but their implementation will be highly politicized. This is already brought out in the way the eighth and last MDG ('develop a global partnership for development') is operationalized is already much more contentious – certainly if taken seriously by the northern countries. The point here is not so much to agree or disagree with the Development Goals. Rather, my argument is that they are not neutral and that their implementation will move this globalizing world in a direction of further capitalist development from which no escape is possible. It touches every geographic region, every sphere of life and every individual, without exception. It will forcibly transform not just societies but the way that people live in a process of quasi-religious conversion which makes them fit for a productive role in the market place. Yet, in spite of (or because of) Jeffrey Sachs we know that the capitalist promise of earthly paradise through consumerism will remain out of reach for most of the new and old 'converts'. The global agreement of the MDG's – as well as myriad other global development conventions – simply obscures the neo-liberal economic orthodoxy that rules the world since Reaganomics and Thatcherism became the dominant paradigms.

It is my firm conviction and prediction that the MDGs will not be realized in our lifetime. The language and techniques of implementation, of good governance, of accountability, however, will ensure that any blame for eventual failure will not lie with those exuding good intentions but will be projected onto the recipients – the so-called target groups, whether they be failed states or traditionalist tribes. Having worked in Vietnam – a 'country in transition' from socialism to a capitalist market economy – I have seen clearly how poverty became an individual or group stigma. From a situation of shared poverty that was simply an attribute of life, or the result of political mistakes by the leadership, poverty became the property of individual persons, households, and sometimes ethnic groups, who were blamed for their poverty. Poverty became a stigma, associated with certain stereotypical qualities like laziness, backwardness, etc., as described by the Swedish development sociologist Bent Jorgensen in his doctoral dissertation (2006). In the same vein, at the macro-level of the MDGs poor countries or groups will be blamed for not meeting the targets – rather than those who set the targets but fail to facilitate their implementation. Often, poverty is the result of the very disciplining methods of global humanitarianism, like structural adjustment policies.

### Development fundamentalism?

In the wake of September 11, the label of 'fundamentalism' has become an abusive term in popular discourse and public debate. Whereas some Christian and Muslim groups may proudly assume the label of fundamentalist, such is not the case when the word 'fundamentalism' is prefixed by a word like 'market' or 'Enlightenment'. In such combinations, the suffix of 'fundamentalism' adds a connotation of self-righteousness and rigidity in thinking, and of aggressive, uncompromising implementation in practice. That is precisely the connotation that I would like to attach to the word 'development' in the present-day context. As a fundamentalist

practice, development furthers the reach of global capitalism by conversion – both at macro and micro-levels. While the MDG's hold out the promise that a better world can be achieved and suffering can be removed, their seemingly neutral and benign character mask their collusion with the globalization of neo-liberal capitalism (Gray 1998; 2000; Chua 2003).

For want of a viable alternative, development preaches the gospel of the market and holds out the promise of wealth – indeed, a prosperity gospel. Conversely, attempts to evade or escape this type of capitalist development is proactively countered or – if sufficiently exotic – appropriated as a folkloric consumption item, e.g. through the commoditization of 'tribal' forms. Development cooperation heralds the promise of consumption paradise, capitalism's most formidable weapon (of mass production), which brought the Soviet Union to its knees. Its conversional persuasion is not matched by its actual delivery, for while new goods always evoke desire among those who don't possess them, their eventual attainment means that the focus is shifted to other desires and goods. Capitalist paradise tantalizes because of the insatiability of the economic needs: The system only works in a context of infinite needs – needs that can never be fulfilled. In such a context, development cooperation risks to become a ritual incantation of the capitalist paradise that we seemingly cannot avoid or escape. To paraphrase Carl von Clausewitz' *On War* (1982), development cooperation is a continuation of politics by other means, and sometimes even the continuation of war by other means.

Because we cannot avoid capitalist development, we are all 'converts' – as consumers and hence producers. And because consumption feels good, gives choice and evokes a feeling of freedom, we don't even acknowledge the other side of the coin, i.e. that it is forcibly imposed (Chua 2003; Gray 2000). Now if development can be considered a secular religion and hence as a quasi-religious project preaching that the gospel of prosperity is within reach for all, then what does the discourse and practice of faith-based development tell us? Can a transcendental and this-worldly *telos* and their concomitant practices be combined?

In my view, in the era of millennial capitalism this combination is only possible through the sacralization of (secular) development on the one hand, and by 'secularizing' religious practice and ethic as 'prosperity religions' with a materialist, this-worldly calling. The question whether the rapprochement between religion and development, advocated by Christian politicians and exasperated development institutions that are losing faith in their own calling, constitutes a crisis or a new opportunity, I answer provocatively that this implies a simultaneous crisis in the field of development and of religion.

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