1 Introduction

Discourse on Religion and Development has witnessed a shift in recent years with a distinct move from religion as a threat to social welfare and development, towards the recognition of the role played by religion or spirituality in promoting development. The ‘turn’ towards religion as being beneficial to development, has largely arisen from the recognition that for the global South “spirituality is integral to their understanding of the world and their place in it, and so is central to the decisions that they make about their own and their communities’ development” (ver Beek 2000, 31). It should be noted, however, that while development discourse has only recently recognized the value of religion, it is religious practitioners that have been at the forefront of mitigating the effects of poverty for centuries.

As a woman of colour, writing from the perspective of the Global South and more specifically from an African context, both constructs of religion and of development are contested notions. By placing this on the table, the intersection of religion and development as a growing field – also within Practical Theology – becomes dialogical and produces a creative tension within this exploration. This chapter explores three key points of engagement within the discussion of religion and development, namely: poverty alleviation, social capital and agency. It is important to note, however, that as a South African working in the field of Theology and Development, these concepts are explored with reference both to recent discourse on these concepts and contextualized with regards to African and, at times, South African praxis with main references to Christian praxis. Although the chapter’s contextualization takes place largely within an African context, there are many points of contact with other contexts in the Global South, as well as tensions with, and perspectives from, the Global North.

The chapter begins with various critical perspectives on the notion of poverty alleviation by exploring the tensions between charity and development, the ‘double legacy’ of missionary colonialism and development for Africa and the importance of holism and the decolonial debate for religious engagement with poverty in an African context. These discussions recognize the intersections of gender, religion and culture as being key to poverty alleviation. The section also deals with the importance of Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) as agents of poverty alleviation and their contribution. The second part of this exploration deals with the way in which religion is argued as being central to social change and poverty alleviation, through the manner in which it generates high levels of social capital. This discussion is also contextualized within a sub-Saharan African context in particular and explores the way in which churches and church groups, act as core assets in mobilizing bonding,
bridging and linking capital in service of poorer communities in particular. The final
section deals with the notion of agency and the ways in which religion can promote
social transformation, by highlighting in particular the importance of recognizing
theological notions of power and justice in seeking such transformation. The section
highlights the need to problematize development projects themselves by questioning
whether they are truly liberative as well as being aware of the ways in which our ec-
clesiology of development could be challenged.¹

2 Poverty Alleviation

2.1 Charity versus Development?

While discourse on religion and development is more recent, religious responses to
poverty alleviation has a long history. In fact, all religions “have a long tradition of
charitable work, including giving food and other items to the poorest and caring for
orphans and the sick and dying” (Tomalin 2013, 20). Moreover, disaster relief as well
as provision in the areas of education, health and the strengthening of livelihoods
has been central to religious work. These actions are rooted in the fact that most re-
ligious traditions have “mechanisms of helping the poor as a central feature”. For
example, in Buddhism it is “selfless giving”, in Islam the practice of “Zakat” as pillar
of the religion and in the Judeo-Christian religions “love of neighbour” (Tomalin
2013, 20). The engagement of religions with poverty has, however, been critiqued
as more firmly located within a ‘charity’ – rather than ‘development’ paradigm.
The charitable approach often entails the provision of basic needs to relieve the
plight of the poor, such as: food, clothing and the provision of welfare services in
the form of care homes for the elderly and orphanages. Although not wrong in
and of themselves, these ‘first generation’ development strategies, as popularly iden-
tified by development scholar David Korten (1990, 115) and framed within Christian-
ity as an example of ‘service’ to the poor, may lead to dependency if not combined
with the empowerment strategies of development (Korten 1990, 115; Swart 2006,
24.25). Swart (2006, 24) also notes that in this way, charity work may even represent
“a form of paternalism of which the net result has been the historical, almost com-
plete estrangement between the Christian churches, on the one hand, and the work-
ing classes and poor on the other”.

Tomalin (2013, 20), nevertheless, acknowledges that while many religious ac-
tions may fall more firmly into the charitable paradigm, religious actors do ask ques-
tions as to the roots of poverty and inequality and how these should be overcome,
which she argues “bridges the gap” between development work and charity work.

¹ It should be noted that this contribution does not seek to deal with all mainstream religions, but
largely focuses on Christian faith communities.
The 2012 Busan gathering of the World Council of Churches, for example, saw a watershed in the ecumenical understanding of *diaconia*, a term which had come to dominate ecumenical development discourse and had largely been understood as compassionate service to the poor and marginalized. Ecumenical scholars in the field now point towards the importance of not reducing the notion of diaconia to compassionate service or acts of charity: “ecumenical diakonia today requires a critical analysis of what causes poverty and human suffering and bold action in defense of the excluded and their rights”. In this way Christian understandings must be shaped by equal notions of compassion and justice (Phiri and Donsung 2014, 253; Nordstokke 2014, 265).

### 2.2 The Colonial Era: A Double Legacy

The notion of ambivalence with regards to religions’ engagement with poverty alleviation occurs from several perspectives, not least of which is what may be termed the “double legacy” of colonial missionary endeavors. Christian approaches towards poverty alleviation during the colonial era in the Global South, for example, are acknowledged as much for establishing basic welfare infrastructure such as schools and hospitals, as they are for the manner in which colonialism stands at the very root of the systemic impoverishment of the Global South. Manji and O’Coil’s (2002) seminal article entitled “The missionary position: NGOs and development in Africa”, for example notes that during the colonial era, missionary societies and other voluntary organizations are identified as providing “a cheap form of private welfare” in order to control the black populace as the wealth of their countries flowed to the Global North. They further note that charity of this kind was not only intended to assist the poor, but also to serve the rich in their quest to quell social unrest that would affect colonial interests (Manji and O’Coil 2002, 570). While Xaba (2015, 5) acknowledges this, he notes not only the role played by missionaries in establishing soft infrastructure, but also in standing “in support of Africans against colonial interests”. This double legacy remains relevant within today’s continuing dynamic between global North donors and their global South recipients as discussed in the section that follows pertaining to Faith Based Organizations.

### 2.3 Faith Based Organizations as Active Agents in Addressing Poverty Alleviation

In terms of poverty alleviation, the most active agents of development have certainly been Faith Based Organizations. Their contribution to development and the allevia-

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2 This discussion is taken further in the section on religious agency.
tion of poverty, are perhaps most popularly identified by James (2011, 111) as the following:

- providing efficient development services;
- reaching the poorest at grassroots;
- having a long-term sustainable presence;
- being legitimate and valued by the poorest;
- providing an alternative to a secular theory of development;
- eliciting motivated and voluntary service;
- encouraging civil society advocacy.

Indeed, “existing studies appear to show that Faith Based Organizations (hereafter referred to as FBOs) are more likely to score highly in terms of moral and ethical standing, understanding of the local context, flexibility and the ability to mobilize energy and resources” (Tomalin 2012, 699). The term FBO, however, is itself contested – even by FBOs themselves – and has come to refer to a wide range of organizations including: congregations, mission organizations, aid and NGO³ type organizations, denominations, networks and even training institutions. Clarke and Jennings (2008, 6) provide perhaps the broadest definition: “any organization that derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teaching or principles of faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within the faith”. This contestation has resulted on the one hand in some scholars arguing that congregations, for example, should not be included in this definition. On the other hand, arguments exist that “to limit the definition of FBOs to formally registered organizations that resemble NGOs would exclude much religiously inspired development work with which donors might usefully engage” (Clarke and Jennings 2008, 6). Although congregations have at times been critiqued for engaging more in charitable relief and welfare responses, congregations remain important as they are often the first point of contact, since they are often made up of the poor themselves.

Various typologies have also emerged in order to seek to categorize FBOs, according for example with regards to their faith-centeredness or characteristics, however, due to the complex and contested nature of FBOs, this is no easy task (see Sider and Unruh 2004). Tomalin (2012, 694) makes the important point that in the Global South many organizations “operate in contexts where the relationship between the religious and secular are not clearly differentiated”. Unlike the Global North, which makes a clear distinction between the material and the spiritual realms and may not always acknowledge the manner in which religious behaviors and values lie at the roots of issues such as poverty and marginalization as being religiously influenced, development in the Global South cannot ignore the importance of religion. In fact, FBOs in the Global South may be expected to engage the civic realm from the perspective of faith (James 2009, 10). James (2011, 11) adds that it is in fact faith that

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3 Non-Governmental Organizations.
“provides fuel for action” in many FBOs and that the unique contribution of FBOs is indeed their faith basis, which he argues “offers hope, meaning, purpose and transcedental power” to the work of poverty alleviation. Tensions remain, however, with regards to the intersection of religion and development as evidenced within the work of FBOs. On the one hand, FBOs use of relief and development work to proselytize has been identified as problematic, while on the other hand FBOs themselves find the pressure of donors to downplay their faith ethos equally challenging (Thaut 2009, 329). Tomalin (2012, 696) highlights the ways in which Western donor agencies, while claiming their “engagement with FBOs as evidence of their acceptance of the importance of incorporating cultural and religious values and practices into development policy and practice”, in fact prove the exact opposite by requiring that there be little to no evangelical faith expression. The emerging findings of my own current research entitled “Does Faith Matter? The role of Faith Based Organizations as civil society role players in South Africa”, however, appears to indicate that South African Christian FBOs are not swayed by donor calls from the North to downplay their Christian ethos, with one respondent of the study claiming that this would be like “disowning my own mother or father”. While scholars remain divided as to whether FBOs can claim to possess a comparative advantage to secular organizations in terms of their outcomes, FBOs have and do continue to play a key role in addressing the alleviation of poverty worldwide.

2.4 Holism, Decolonizing and Intersectionality in Addressing Poverty

As already alluded to, development in the Global South has highlighted the importance of values and spirituality within development work, as there is no separation between the physical and spiritual realms within most cultures in the South. Indeed, August (2014, 46) argues that “followers of Jesus Christ who engage in social action should never have to choose between satisfying physical hunger and spiritual hunger or between healing bodies and saving souls”. This has served as a critique to the dominant secular economic Modernization development models of the North, which conceived of development as an “inevitable, unilinear process that operates neutrally in every culture” and which reduces the meeting of human need to the physical alone (August 2014, 62). Perhaps most problematic about this model of development, was that it was based on the flawed assumption that in order for development to occur, western values, worldviews and goals were to be pursued (August 2014, 63). African scholars such as Adenay (1987, 96) highlighted this issue over 30 years ago. She argued that while Christian development projects should not be uncritical of cultural practices that dehumanize, it should ask the following questions: ‘Does the project fit with local worldviews, concepts and values?’, ‘Does the project fit with local structures?’ and ‘does the project fit with local economic resources?’ Such questions, she argued, are key in placing local people at the centre of the de-
velopment agenda and thus ensuing the sustainability of development work (Adenay 1987, 96–106).

Current discourse, however, demands that we move one step further: how could African Initiated Church grassroots praxis for example unearth points of critique ‘from below’ to decolonize current western development praxis? In what ways does its holistic cosmology challenge western notions of development and promote grassroots agency of the kind that is rooted in Africa? These questions challenge us to ask in what ways indigenous culture can not only be valued but be placed at the center of development praxis in Global South contexts and pose a challenge to Western models.

African development scholars and practitioners also recognize the manner in which religion and culture highlights the intersectional nature of poverty. Several African scholars, for example, highlight the manner in which patriarchal religious beliefs re-inforce cultural practices, resulting in women’s increased vulnerability to poverty (Fagbeminiyi and Oluwatoyin 2010; Para-Mallam 2006, 413). In addressing women’s social disadvantage, it is, therefore, “also important to examine and to attempt to transform religious attitudes” (Tomalin 2013, 157). In addition, poverty alleviation work must “disentangle patriarchal values from their justification as religious and promote alternative (many would argue ‘authentic’) interpretations of religious traditions that are supportive of women’s human’s rights and empowerment” (Tomalin 2013, 167). This would include the notion of gender partnership and mutuality in development work, as promoted by African Christian womanist scholars such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye who argue that the “partnership of women and men are both necessary if the church is to be whole and to be the light of Christ for the world” (Onwunta and August 2012, 3). This partnership, it is argued, could see faith leaders, who are still largely male, stand in solidarity with women on key development issues such as maternal health, HIV/AIDS and Gender Based Violence (GBV).

3 Social Capital

3.1 The Value of Religion within the Social Capital Debate

The centrality of social capital to development is largely shaped by the way in which empirical studies show that increased levels of social capital directly reduce levels of poverty, increase wellbeing, reduce crime rates, increase economic productivity and intensify political participation amongst others. In fact, some scholars have argued that communities with both higher and more diverse stocks of social capital “will be in a stronger position to confront poverty and vulnerability” (Traunmüller and Freitag 2011, 253). Fukayama (2001, 18) notes that beyond the role of the state, there are only two “other potential external sources of social capital”: religion and
globalization. He goes on to state that while secularization applies largely to western Europe, other parts of the world are seeing new forms of religiosity and religiously inspired social change.\footnote{This, however, is tempered by the fact that social capital also has negative outcomes such as sectarianism which breeds “intolerance, hatred and violence” (Fukayama 2001, 18).}

The central role of religion in building social capital, is largely due to the fact that religious organizations are able to generate significant amounts of social capital. Three major arguments are identified as supporting this notion. Firstly, religious organizations, such as churches, play a central role in community life – often performing “social, cultural and educational services”. This includes access to basic services such as healthcare and education. They also serve as places where community members develop civic skills as volunteers and they offer spaces for those often-marginalized groups in community (such as the poor, women, migrants, the elderly) to participate civically (Traunmüller and Freitag 2011, 254; Ruben 2011, 232). It could be argued that these actions are based on religious teachings, which promote such activities as aspects of religious capital.

It has also been argued that participation in civic organizations, such as religious organizations, create social bonds and social trust – “making collective action much easier” as well as advancing “values and mores regarding communal life, such as reciprocity, trustworthiness and friendship”. Some scholars refer to ‘spiritual capital’, which they view as providing a theological identity and worshipping tradition, undergirded by a “value system, moral vision and basis for faith”. This form of capital is embedded within groups but expressed through individuals and enhances social capital (Olney and Burton 2011, 29).\footnote{It should be noted that this identification has also come under fire from some scholars who argue that it fails to recognize group hierarchy, neglects reflection on the “dynamics between ritual action and social action and fails to distinguish between spiritually motivated social action and politically or culturally motivated social action” (Montemaggi 2011, 68).} While both Fukayama (2001, 18) and Traunmüller and Freitag (2011, 254) recognize the fact that religious organizations could also generate ‘negative’ social capital in the form of exclusivist or sectarian groups that foster intolerance, distrust and even violence – they appear to argue that the benefit for the ‘common good’ far outweighs the bad.

The benefit of religions in the development of social capital for the common good is supported by recent studies. In the US context, almost half of all associational members, personal philanthropy and volunteering is within a religious context (Traunmüller and Freitag 2011, 255) This is no different in Europe, where “faith-based volunteering and faith-based donations comprise a substantial part of active involvement and philanthropy in Europe” – despite the differences in variation across neighboring countries (Traunmüller and Freitag 2011, 255.256). Such findings were not only acknowledged by governments, such as the UK’s ruling Labour Party in the early 2000’s but promoted within their policy documents. FBOs were viewed as “contributing to community and empowerment and engagement through their net-
works, organizational capacity and resources, local knowledge and voluntary action” (Montemaggi 2011, 70), thus not only assisting to deliver basic services but also to promote community cohesion in partnership with the state.

In sub-Saharan Africa, churches and FBOs deliver up to 40% of basic health care provision and have extensive reach into poor households due to their long term relationships with the civic cause and strong identification with the demands of the poor. Churches/FBOs are also recognized for their contribution to the protection of human rights and, more recently, with regards to reconciliation and reconstruction after civic conflict (Ruben 2011, 232). In a South African context, religious actors are identified as generating considerable amounts of social trust through their volunteer work, care work and involvement in social services. So much so that one of the provincial governments recognized the religious sector as the key role player in their ‘Social Capital Formation strategy’ (Eigelaar-Meets, Gomulia, and Geldenhuys 2010, 53). The role played by religious communities in moral formation and the development of values is also viewed as valuable within the South African context.

This is affirmed by scholars in other African contexts who view religious beliefs as “associated with solidarity, altruism, humane values, charity etc., thus promoting co-operation with others and positive attitudes towards others” (Kaasa 2013, 580). Adogame (2013, 114) for example points out the way in which African Christians in the diaspora, harness spiritual and social capital to “lift themselves out of poverty” through church-based savings and loan schemes which pool resources to provide resources such as microfinance to small business owners. In an unequal context such as South Africa, with high levels of race-based inequality rooted in its Apartheid legacy, religious actors are viewed as possibly providing both bridging and linking social capital by fostering the dismantling of racial, cultural and socio-economic barriers (Eigelaar-Meets, Gomulia, and Geldenhuys 2010, 54). The latter, however, has not been realized fully in our context and remains a challenge in order to bridge the race-based inequality. How could partnerships between largely rich white congregations and poorer black congregations be encouraged in a way that fosters the dismantling of those barriers in order to give rise to reciprocity, trust and empowerment? This is not an easy question to answer in our context, but it is one which must be dealt with, as much current generation of social capital focuses on bridging (within communities, homogenous race and economic groups) rather than linking social capital (towards other communities, racial and economic groups).

3.2 Approaches to Poverty Alleviation that Build on the Social Capital Debate

Perhaps the most well-known recent approach to community development that builds on discourse around Social Capital is Assets Based Community Development (ABCD). ABCD is a strengths-based approach, premised on the understanding that local communities can drive the development processes themselves through the uti-
lization and mobilization of their own (often unrecognized) assets (Mathie and Cunningham 2003, 474; De Gruchy 2015, 78). In fact, ABCD is identified as “a practical application of the concept of social capital” as ABCD recognizes for example the “potential of community associations to mobilize bonding social capital and increase bridging social capital” (Mathie and Cunningham 2003, 478). With regards to religion’s role in promoting this approach, De Gruchy (2015, 82) notes the following:

Each particular religious institution offers a unique configuration of specific resources which can be utilized in the process of community building. Yet every religious institution, whether large or small, urban or rural, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim or Buddhist, or other always offers certain common sets of resources which can be mobilized.

Churches and church groups, then, act as core assets in mobilizing bonding and bridging and linking capital for the community. Haddad (2010, 129), for example, notes the manner in which networks of religious women in rural South Africa serve as places where women “find courage, strength and resources to persevere in the face of near death” by “harnessing the physical and spiritual resources” within these networks. Perhaps one of the most interesting ways in which the social capital debate intersects with praxis – is the manner in which the African Independent Churches (AICs) may be viewed as generators of social capital in order to address poverty and marginalization. While AICs, could not be said to be applying ABCD as an approach, it is clear that they bond, bridge and link for the good of the communities in which they reside. The development projects of AICs are “small scale, self-generated, resourced by local congregants and internally funded” (Masondo 2014, 10). AICs, therefore, may be termed generators of social and spiritual capital, because their development work is not centered on financial capital, but rather on their extensive social networks and shared spiritual and cultural values, which they use to bridge and link their people to the resources needed for development.

4 Religious Agency

4.1 Agency, Power and Participation in the Context of Religion and Development

Religious agency is part of the way in which both individuals and collectives contribute to social change. It is also tied to dimensions of human action and identity. The notion of agency within development discourse has perhaps most popularly been defined by Amartya Sen’s book Development as Freedom (1999). Sen argues that freedom is both the end and means of development. In his definition, freedom is “not the opposite of oppression”, but is rather opposed to unfreedom, a word he defines to include the full range of hindrances to human flourishing or “capability deprivation” (De Gruchy 2015, 73; Sen 1999, 23). While Sen defines freedom from in terms of
common development indicators such as: from starvation, malnourishment, escapable morbidity and premature mortality, he also defines it as freedom to, for example literacy and numeracy, political participation, freedom of speech etc., (Sen 1999, 36). He sees freedom as central in enhancing “the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the world” (De Gruchy 2015, 73), as a means of development:

With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. They need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of cunning development programmes. There is a strong rationale for recognizing the positive role of free and sustainable agency – and even of constructive impatience. (Sen 1999, 21)

Underlying this is the assumption that all citizens – not just the elites – should be active participants in their own social, political and economic life. In advocating for this kind of participation, power must be central to development discourse and practice. A “more egalitarian pattern of distribution” must be promoted by encouraging the participation of the poorest of the poor in their own development, challenging rich Christians to “critically examine their own power base” (Swart 2006, 47–48). This is not unlike the call of Liberation Theology, which should be re-explored in order to provide theological critique to current engagement with the poor and marginalized in many contexts. Where Christian development practice attempts to understand power only in terms of empowerment as skills transfer and ‘projectized’ development, then people are reduced to objects of development rather than as agents and subjects of their own development. This kind of projectized development could thus be seen as retaining the “relationships of power that were characteristic of the missionary and charity services of the churches” (Elliot 1987, 17–23) which promoted dependency and the abandonment of indigenous knowledge systems in the past. In a South African context, for example, Christian development practitioners seeking to ‘do’ development that is sustainable and just, must recognize the manner in which our racially-skewed poverty and inequality calls into question our practice.

In a recent article on the need to decolonise the development praxis of Christian Development Organisations (CDOs) in a South African context I noted the following:

CDOs will need to reflect on whether they are truly contextually engaged and valuing local knowledge systems and cultures or whether their own policies and practices continue to “en-shrine white superiority and black inferiority” (Vellum 2016, 2; Tshaka and Mafokane 2010, 535). How do they read the bible and do they read the bible with those they serve? What kinds of spirituality inform their practices? Do they take black experiences as their point of departure when designing projects and programmes? (Bowers Du Toit 2018, 31–32)

If CDOs fail to take such issues into account – and this includes Global North CDOs working in the Global South – rather than promoting agency and self-reliance, they will reproduce dependency and disempowerment.

It is also important to note that often development that focuses on projectized notions of development that do not recognize power – and which may be termed
‘pragmatic’ – encourage close partnership with the state. In many contexts, however, this partnership may be with a corrupt state that seeks to oppress the very people who should benefit from development. In such contexts, the role of the church in development, must include a prophetic element that recognizes the roots of poverty and inequality in such contexts and not only seeks to promote development through its daily development work, but also through its solidarity with the poorest of the poor.

4.2 Social Movements as Examples of Religious Agency

Some of the most prominent examples of the role of religious agency in social change is that of the Civil Rights and Anti-Apartheid movements respectively – movements which sought to stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Prominent development scholar, David Korten, argues that in order for development praxis to be values-driven, social movements often take the lead in “promoting an alternative vision of a more just society” (Korten 1990, 124). He argues this as the ‘Fourth Generation of development’. These movements are not driven by “budgets or organizational structures”, but rather by an “idea, by a vision of a better world”. They are well positioned to drive social change as they possess the ability to “rapidly and flexibly network diverse and dispersed individuals and organizations that are motivated by voluntary commitments” (Korten 1995, 55). South African scholar, Ignatius Swart, argues that as a role player in global civil society, the church has a unique role to play in the intersection between development and civil society discourse (Swart 2006, 144). And, indeed, economic justice and resistance to the global forces of neo-liberalism are macro development agenda’s which a civil society role player with global reach, such as the church, can and must address.

Such social movements are most commonly exemplified by global campaigns such as Jubilee 2000/Drop the Debt, which drew on biblical notions of justice to call for an end to the crippling debt imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions on the Global South. Movements such as this one used the power and reach of the global church to activate and mobilize a global advocacy campaign by promoting an alternative vision of a more just society. More recently the #Feesmustfall student movement in South Africa has tackled the issues of inequality, neoliberalism and lack of transformation in the Higher Education sector in SA. Although the social movement itself was not a religious one, in a country that is 80% Christian, some of the student activists who participated identified as Christians and saw their activism as an outworking of their theology. Their activism was viewed as rooted in their vision of a just God as found in scripture, a God who had compassion for the marginalized and oppressed and called them to do likewise. However, they also critiqued mainstream Christianity for subscribing to the kind of theological dualism that focuses life only on the ‘world hereafter’ and results in passivity and inaction from the church (Lee 2017). Such social movements, as fourth generation actors driven by agency
often fueled by religious motivations, then play an important role in re-activating what may be termed as a prophetic vision of a more just society.

5 Conclusion: The Challenge of this Contribution for Contemporary Practical Theological Discourse

Practical Theology stands at intersections – of faith and life, of theory and practice, of church and society – and this contribution embodies much of that ambiguous, yet exciting, tension in seeking to discuss the intersection between religion and development. The latter field is itself an emerging one largely populated by scholars within the fields of Sociology of Religion and Development Studies, and this chapter also acknowledges this placement, while seeking to engage faith praxis from diaconal, grassroots and contextual perspectives. Religion and Development discourse remains a fairly open field with much still to be explored. The global and local complexities within which faith-based development practitioners work are challenging and in need of greater engagement from the perspective of Practical Theology and this chapter sought to highlight some key points of departure in current discourse. It also seeks to give voice to some of the critical discourses and issues in the study and practice of the field. Notions such as decolonization and the manner in which development itself is implicated in the colonial project; the subtle difference between empowerment and power / charity and liberation; the need to center culture and gender in development discourse and the manner in which religion complicates and implicates faith-based development are all highlighted.

Through exploring these critical perspectives in this contribution, Practical Theology is interpreted as a form of Public Theology – and voice is given to often unheard perspectives emerging from the Global South at the intersection of church and society. There remain, however, many unheard voices in the intersection between religion and development as this is both an emerging sub-field within the fields of Development and Theology respectively. These are also key challenges for the larger field of Practical Theology itself, as it highlights the importance of intersectionality within the field. Are, for example, notions of power and gender (in both research and practice) foregrounded in our research as Practical Theologians? Do we, as scholars in Practical Theology, acknowledge our own positionality with sufficient emphasis? Is there an acknowledgement within the academy that the most prominent Practical Theological voices are still from the Global North, and how can these power dynamics be acknowledged and addressed? Perhaps even the manner in which my own contribution is written, still betrays my bias in working at times from Global North definitions towards the South so the challenge to decenter the North – even as a Global South scholar in such an emerging field – remains. Perhaps this is the ‘elephant in the room’ as we seek to produce Practical Theology that
centers our own practical theological realities and not only Northern discourse and practice.

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