

# Advocating the value-add of faith in a secular context: The case of the Knowledge Centre Religion and Development in the Netherlands



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This article analyses how faith-based civil society organisations have advocated the value-add of faith to governmental and non-governmental development actors in the highly secularised context of the Netherlands. Its social value lies in the space for reflexivity it opens up on how the religious and the secular are entangled in the field of development through shifting the gaze towards secularised Europe. Its academic value lies in how it combines the study of faith and development, with a critical analysis of the secular formations in which much of the thinking around faith and development is shaped. The article builds on an academic study of and long-term engagement with the Dutch non-governmental organisation (NGO)-based Knowledge Centre Religion and Development (KCRD), offering a critical overview of the KCRD's work between 2006 and 2016. Data were gathered through interviews, document analysis and participant observation as part of the academic research, as well as informal observations and analysis through professional engagement. The KCRD, because of its institutional setting, had to adopt an instrumental approach towards the role of religion in development, which prevented it from challenging the reigning secular paradigm in development and its biases towards faith-based actors. The article will recommend that future initiatives on faith and development more consciously anchor their approach to faith in their institutional practices and mainstream discussions on the European continent.

**Keywords:** Religion; Secularity; International development; Faith-Based organisations; The Netherlands.

## Introduction

The role of religion in development has attracted an increasing interest from policymakers, professionals and academics alike in recent years (Ager & Ager 2016; Barnet & Stein 2012; Deneulin & Bano 2009; Jones & Petersen 2011; Marshall 2001; Ter Haar & Ellis 2006; Tomalin 2015). In the past two decades, various initiatives have been taken in Europe as well as internationally to respond to this trend and develop an in-depth understanding of the role of religion in development processes. The Dutch non-governmental organisation (NGO) Knowledge Centre Religion and Development (KCRD) has been among those European initiatives that attempted to grapple with the intersection between religion and development.

Unfortunately, because of lack of funding, the KCRD ceased to exist in 2016 (Bartelink 2016b; Fountain & Petersen 2018; Tomalin 2015). Nevertheless, the existence and experiences of KCRD offer an excellent setting within which to explore the reality of raising awareness on the roles and meanings of religion within an overtly secular setting in which the space for religious engagement is limited.

One of KCRD's primary aims was raising awareness among governmental and non-governmental actors in the development sector about the added value of faith actors in international development. It did so in an increasingly secularised development sector in one of the most secularised societies of Western Europe (Kennedy 2012; Schuh, Burchardt & Wohlrab-Sahr 2012). Even if the KCRD is a specific case in a specific context, the context and its challenges are not unique for the international development sector in an overtly secular field (Deneulin & Bano 2009; Tomalin 2015). It is therefore of a broader social value to better understand the challenges of raising awareness on the role of

**Note:** Faith-Based Organisations, sub-edited by Nadine Bouwers du Toit (Stellenbosch University), Vhumani Magezi (North-West University) and Elisabet le Roux (Stellenbosch University).

religion and faith actors in settings where secularism is the dominant discourse. Over the past decade, various of a similar nature have been undertaken, that is, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities in the United States or United Kingdom, the NGO Network for Religion and Development in Denmark, the Knowledge Forum for Religion and Development in Sweden and Digni in Norway are examples of NGO initiatives, and the International Platform for Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) is a donor initiative, while there are also (new) academic initiatives such as the roundtables organised by the Amsterdam Centre for Religion and Sustainable Development in the Netherlands. In view of this, a reflection on the experiences of the KCRD comes at an opportune moment.

The scientific value of this piece is vested in its contribution towards a better understanding of how the secular in its entanglement with religion influences discourses and practices of religion and development (Fountain 2013; Fountain & Petersen 2018). As such it finds its inspiration in the call within anthropology and cultural sociology for research on secularity (Asad 2003; Verkaaik & Spronk 2011). As is further conceptualised below, the dichotomy of the religious and the secular has widely been criticised, yet it seems to have a social life in the context of international development (Le Roux & Loots 2017; Olivier 2016; Wilson 2012). This article aims to contribute to a better understanding of how these dichotomies are affirmed and reproduced by faith-based and secular development actors.

This article will be structured as follows: firstly, it will introduce the current academic debates on religion, development and secularism. Secondly, it will discuss the methodology and data gathered for this article. The findings are discussed in three sections, starting with an introduction of the KCRD and the Dutch context in which it aimed to raise awareness on the role of religion in development. We argue that the dominance of the instrumental logic, in which religion is primarily understood as an instrument to realise development outcomes, narrows the possibilities for the KCRD to influence and change development discourses. In the subsequent sections, we discuss how this plays out in the interaction between the KCRD and the Dutch government around sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHRs), and its own network of religiously diverse faith-based organisations (FBO). In the conclusion, the final argument is made that the challenges of navigating cultural and religious diversity for religion and development initiatives have to take into account the power dynamics of the majority.

## **Reading 'religion and development advocacy' as a case of secularism**

Religion was a neglected topic in development research as well as policy circles until the end of the 20th century (Jones & Petersen 2012; Olivier 2016; Ver beek 2000). When religion started to be acknowledged as a factor relevant to development, this initially came more from the development sector itself, rather than from scholars of religion or development (Jones &

Petersen 2012). It was international agencies such as United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) which started to engage more consciously with religious leaders and faith-based agencies (Deneulin & Bano 2011). In Western Europe, some initiatives were taken, for example, the chair on religion and development at the Institute for Social Studies in the Netherlands endowed in 1999 and the programme, funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), on religion and development at Birmingham University (cf. Fountain & Petersen 2018; Olivier 2016). Many scholars have contributed towards a better understanding of the role of religion in development, also engaging critically by problematising the particular constructions of religion within professional and academic engagement with religion in development (Fountain 2013; Fountain & Petersen 2018; Jones & Petersen 2011; Olivier 2016; Tomalin 2015).

The radical shift from neglect to emphasise that religion is meaningful in processes of development is largely the result of 'religion and development advocacy' by faith-based development actors (Olivier 2016:2). In this advocacy process, these faith actors have also been actively promoting and supporting a dichotomous frame of the religious and the secular to argue for the unique qualities and contributions of religious actors. The consequences of this for the field of development, as well as for the scholarship on religion and development, have become increasingly clear. First of all, promoting religion as good for development has resulted in scepticism on the side of secular donors and an increased demand for evidence to sustain the claims that faith actors indeed have a unique role and contribution (Olivier 2016).

Secondly, it has produced a very narrow understanding of religion in the field of development. Even when faith actors are seen as offering alternative or better approaches to development, the focus remains on realising development outcomes and religious dimensions of their work are ignored (Fountain & Petersen 2018; Jones & Petersen 2012). In addition, when only elements of religions that are good or bad for development are addressed, the comprehensiveness of religions, the internal dynamics, processes of change and the entanglement with socio-economic and political contexts remain irrelevant and invisible (Deneulin & Bano 2009; Olivier 2016). Thirdly, there is little understanding of how the secular and the religious are entangled in the context of development (Barnett & Stein 2012). The distinction between faith-based and secular organisations creates an assumption that religion does not influence secular development organisations. However, historically secularism and protestant Christianity are closely entangled (Keane 2007). A Christian bias within secularism has been observed (Le Roux & Loots 2017). Furthermore, in the Global South, employees of secular organisations are often religious and also work in contexts where religion is a relevant factor (Fountain & Petersen 2018; Olivier 2016). By comparison, FBOs can at times be very secular in terms of how they understand and approach religion and development, which is particularly so in the secularised

contexts of Western Europe (Bartelink 2016a; Fountain & Petersen 2018). In other words, the religious and the secular have diverse and shifting meanings for development actors influenced by the contexts in the Global North and Global South from which they emerge and where they are working.

To arrive at a better understanding of how the religious and the secular are entangled in FBOs, more in-depth research is necessary. This research should go beyond critique of the problematic secular or faith dichotomy (Le Roux & Loots 2017; Wilson 2012), but focus on increasing an understanding of how and under which circumstances these binaries are reproduced, including by faith-based development organisations themselves. While the critique of instrumentalisation of religion on the field of development is by now well rehearsed (Ager & Ager 2016; Deacon & Tomalin 2015; Fountain & Petersen 2018; Jones & Petersen 2012; Salemink 2015; Sundqvist 2017), in this article, it provides a relevant lens through which the contributions of faith-based development actors to promoting knowledge about religion can be explored and understood in the context of broader religious or secular formations. In doing so, we propose a processual understanding of secularism in its entanglement with religion, not as a given but as a cultural process that is actively shaped and changed in society. We are inspired by the concept of 'multiple secularities' that needs a detailed analysis of how religious–secular distinctions emerge in various national and cultural contexts, and across a range of institutional fields (Wohlrab-Sahr & Burchardt 2012). This article explores how secularity is shaped in particular ways in the cultural context of the Netherlands and manifests itself in the development sector. A processual understanding of secularism includes the study of secularisation as a process that influences both secular and faith-based organisations (Barnett & Stein 2012).

To understand these processes and their implications for how religion is constructed in the field of development, it is important to increase the insights into the values and ethics that are promoted as part of secular development, while often remaining unnoticed because of the myth of neutrality (Le Roux & Loots 2017). Relevant in this regard is that an increased attention for religion in a rapidly secularising society such as the Netherlands is not so much a sign of resurgent religion but of progressive secularisation as eminent scholars of secularisation have argued (Casanova 1994; Roy & Schwartz 2010). The increased visibility in religion in secularising societies, as expressed in religion and development initiatives, is a paradoxical phenomenon that indicates that religion separates itself from its embeddedness in mainstream culture (Roy & Schwartz 2010). We anticipate that this separation of religion from mainstream culture is even more apparent in religion and development initiatives in the Western Europe because of the focus on religion in the Global South. Therefore, it is both relevant and interesting to explore how faith-based development organisations that operate in contexts of secular dominance navigate the religion or secular binary.

## Methodology

This article draws on in-depth academic research conducted as part of a PhD project focussed on an Anthropology of

Religion and Development. The PhD degree, completed in 2016, was on the KCRD and the discourses on religion and development in the Netherlands (Bartelink 2016a, 2016b). For the purposes of the PhD, document analysis, interviews and literature review were performed. This article draws on these primary and secondary sources.

The basis of this article constitutes eight key-informant interviews with professionals in the Dutch development sector which were recorded and transcribed in 2007 and 2008. The relevance of the interviews for this article is that they captured the initial ideals and motivations of the various participating organisations to start the KCRD and how these translated into the activities performed in the first phase. Participant observation was performed in 10 events organised by the KCRD between 2006 and 2012, and conference reports, project reports and grey literature produced by the KCRD were reviewed. In addition, many informal conversations and participation in meetings and activities organised by the KCRD as well as by other initiatives on religion and development between 2012 and till date have been invaluable for the reflections and analysis offered below. For the purposes of this article, additional document and literature review was conducted to triangulate the findings presented in this article.

## Ethical consideration

This study builds on publicly available documents and qualitative interviews and observations. For the latter, two permissions have been obtained from the participants and organisations of the study before the start of the interview. The research has been carried out in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Groningen; according to the procedures at the university, no formal proof of ethical clearance has been given.

## Findings

In the three sections below, the findings of the study will be summarised. Firstly, the KCRD and its ambitions to realise a more holistic approach to development will be introduced and situated in the context of the Netherlands. In the subsequent two sections, the challenges the KCRD faced to escape or overcome an instrumental logic and realise its ambitions will be discussed, focussing on the dynamics between the FBOs and the Dutch government and on internal dynamics between the FBOs that participated in the KCRD.

## Religion and development advocacy: The case of the Knowledge Centre Religion and Development

The Netherlands is known for its rapid process of de-churching that hugely changed the country's social organisation. Until the 1960s, the Netherlands was a so-called pillarised society: the social organisation of society relied on distinct religious and ideological communities with their

own range of religious and social institutions. This type of pillarisation has been described as secularity for the sake of accommodating religious diversity (Kennedy 2012; Schuh et al. 2012; Vellenga 1995). After the 1960s, large numbers of the population ended their church membership and, in the decades that followed, the social and political organisations of the Netherlands started to shift (Kennedy 2012). This process was accompanied by a secular progressive public discourse that became increasingly dominant in the public domain (Schuh et al. 2012). Relying heavily on images of the sexual revolution as a form of liberation from religion in the Netherlands in the 1960s, from the late 1990s, this became increasingly influential in public discourse in the Netherlands. In secular progressive discourse, religion is seen as either outdated or dangerous. When regarded as outdated, religion is generally seen as irrelevant to society, while the assumption that religion is dangerous tends to focus on the opposition of religion (as oppressive and violent) to the secular as the most tolerant and constructive way of managing diversity.

The Dutch government has an extensive system for funding development NGOs that has been referred to as unique because it relegates a significant part of the implementation of international development policy of the Dutch government to non-governmental actors (Ruben & Schulpen 2009). This system has been referred to as the co-funding system because until the end of the 20th century, the channels for government funding of development through civil society organisations were in accordance with the Dutch system of pillarisation. When the Dutch government introduced the co-funding system in 1968, two of the major FBOs, the Protestant ICCO and Catholic Cordaid, were seen as representing the Christian pillars (Bos & Prins 2000). Alongside the religiously neutral organisation Oxfam/Novib, these organisations received extensive amounts of government funding, and also played a role in funding smaller NGOs for specific programmes, including lobby, advocacy and public campaigning in the Netherlands. Yet, as the faith constituencies of Christian development organisations crumbled under the influence of secularisation, these ICCO and Cordaid could no longer claim legitimacy by merely pointing towards the support for their work by people in Dutch society. From 2005, the funding system started to shift to become one in which more organisations from the Netherlands and beyond could apply for funding from the Dutch government for development projects and programmes focussed on the themes of Dutch development policy (Ruben & Schulpen 2009). This trend has since gained pace and has now evolved into a tender system where NGOs can access funding based on their professionalism and quality of work. These changes increased competition over funds among NGOs, and had implications for how NGOs understood and represented their faith identities.

The KCRD was initiated in 2006 on the initiative of the Catholic development organisation Cordaid, together with the ecumenical civil society organisation Oikos, the Hindu development organisation SEVA and the Islamic University

in the Netherlands. The Protestant development organisation ICCO joined in 2007, and in the years followed the Catholic laity NGO Mensen met een Missie, Islamic Relief Netherlands and Dutch Consortium of Migrant Organisations (DCMO) joined. The KCRD needs to be understood in the context of the dynamics in the Netherlands outlined above (Renkema 2018). Until then, the larger Catholic and Protestant development organisations in the Netherlands had reduced their faith profiles by putting more emphasis on their professionalism (Bartelink 2016a). This was influenced by the decreasing acceptability of faith in the public domain, as well as by their secure funding position in the co-financing system. However, when the funding system changed, organisations now had to strengthen their specific faith identity and approach to mark their distinguishing and unique perspective on development as different from mainstream secular approaches, including those of the government. It is this move towards increased identity-based development approaches that is among the most significant driving forces for the establishment of the KCRD and, arguably, for the increased interest in stressing the value-add of religion to development in the Dutch development sector as such.

Between 2006 and 2011, the KCRD was organised as a network of FBOs and as a think tank with high ambitions to influence the development agenda. The international partner conference entitled 'Transforming Development' that was organised in 2007 by the KCRD was a landmark in this regard. Only by means of the title, it illustrates an ambitious agenda. It brought together staff from the FBOs that participated in the KCRD and a selection of their counterpart FBOs across the world. The point of departure for the conference was a firm critique of dominant views on the development and development cooperation, including the ignorance about religion and spirituality and the predominantly rational, top-down and instrumental approach of Western development perspectives. It took up the critique of the instrumental approach to faith actors that was voiced internationally as a driving factor to develop knowledge exchange and religion and development advocacy (cf. Olivier & Paterson 2011). At the conference, the KCRD proposed to develop an approach referred to as *integral development* that was supposed to offer a more holistic, spiritual perspective on development. Associated with words such as 'process', 'relationship' and 'reflection', integral development was seen as offering an alternative way to engage with cultural and religious differences in the encounter between development actors going beyond a merely instrumental approach. Yet, despite its critical perspective on development, the FBOs that participated in the centre struggled to live up to its claims. The everyday practices and modes of working in the (government-funded) FBOs were outcome oriented and practically there was little space for a more relational approach: '[o]nly good intentions give no results', as one staff member of an FBO commented during the conference captures this well. Integral development remained a philosophical concept rather than a practical agenda for change (Bartelink 2016a).

After 2007, influenced by funding changes and anticipating an even stronger tendency to bring NGO programmes in line with the policy aims of the government, there was increasing pressure to be relevant to the concrete problems that Dutch policymakers and NGOs encountered in the field (cf. Bartelink 2016b). In response to that, KCRD's focus moved to the concrete and specific challenges regarding religion and development that both faith-based and secular development actors faced. Rather than high ambitions such as transforming development, and big projects such as organising an international conference, the KCRD started focussing on smaller thematic meetings and projects. The project focussed on *Fragile States and Religion* in 2008 is a case in point and a direct consequence of the development sector broadly, and the Dutch government specifically, shifting to a focus on fragility and conflict-affected societies (Bartelink 2016a).

In this focus, religion was primarily seen as a dangerous force that creates or legitimises conflict. A conference report on the topic published by the KCRD stated that (Meerkerk 2011):

[I]n fragile states, conflict resolution, reconciliation, poverty reduction, and democratisation are key aspects of development cooperation and peace building. Religion typically affects all these efforts, whether as a constructive force or as a source of concern. (p. 3; [own translation from Dutch to English])

The above quote illustrates that the effort of the KCRD was focussed on challenging the assumption among the Dutch government that religion primarily contributes to violence and conflict, and highlighting religion's potential for conflict transformation and peacebuilding. However, this resulted in affirming the dichotomous view of religion as good or bad that is characteristic for secular discourses that the KCRD initially wished to challenge in its emphasis on integral development (Wilson 2012). In addition, arguing what is good in religion had to be sustained by pointing towards the value-add of religious actors in conflict transformation.

The orientation towards the policy interest of the Dutch government had the inevitable consequence that the KCRD adjusted itself more firmly to the instrumental mode. An article that explored in which ways religion serves as an instrument in development published in 2009 in a Dutch academic journal reflects this (cf. Renkema 2009).

One can, of course, question whether an instrumental approach to religion is in itself problematic. After all, the development sector finds legitimisation in 'solving' problems such as poverty, inequality and illness and is therefore fundamentally result oriented in nature (cf. Barnet & Stein 2012). In the sections below, we will further outline why instrumentalising religion in development produces exactly the problems that religion and development initiatives claim to challenge.

## **Reproducing the religion – Secular binary: Undesired outcomes of religion and development advocacy**

The KCRD continued to engage in conversation with the Dutch government by linking its activities to policy concerns.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights was another policy theme on which policymakers and other key leaders had voiced concerns over the role of religion and religious actors.

Concerns over religion in relation to sexuality need to be understood in the historical and cultural context of the Netherlands, and in particular in relation to tendency towards secular progressivism that has been noted before (Schuh et al. 2012). The secular progressive discourse in the Netherlands assumes a strong polarisation between liberal and conservative positions, in which the secular is commonly assumed to be liberal and progressive, while the religious is seen as conservative (Buijs, Geesink & Holla 2014; Derk 2016; Knibbe 2018). Progressive, liberal positions are developed and solidified by casting it against religion. It builds on historical images of the demonstrations advocating for sexual freedom in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the feminists who referred to Dries van Agt, the catholic prime minister, at the time as 'God's own sexist' (Meulenbelt 2009). Contemporary public discourse often caricatures orthodox Protestant groups as remnants of a Christianity that has largely disappeared, emphasising their positions of progressive issues such as abortion, euthanasia, legalisation of same sex marriage and women political leadership as 'backwards' (Derk 2016; Exalto & Bertram-Troost 2018; Knibbe 2018). In addition, over the past decades, the practices of Muslim citizens have become even more scrutinised and rejected in public and political discourse in the Netherlands, their religiosity is seen as an obstacle for their integration into full citizenship (Balkenhol, Mepschen & Duyvendak 2016; Scott 2017). While Christianity is framed as outdated, Islam is more often framed as dangerous to secular liberalism (Schrijvers & Wiering 2018).

The alleged opposition between conservative religion and progressive secularity is also part of the discourse on SRHR in Dutch development policy. Government and civil society organisations understand themselves as liberal beacons in global contestations over gender and sexuality (Bartelink & Meinema 2014; Roodsaz 2018). In international politics, they are often positioned *vis-à-vis* religio-political actors who advocate against gender and sexual diversity. The then minister for Development Cooperation and International Trade, Lilianne Ploumen reported in 2014 on the Commission on the Status of Women stressing the importance of dialogue with religious leaders and 'those who think differently' on SRHR ('Het is mijn voornemen om mijn dialoog met andersdenkenden voort te zetten, onder andere tijdens dienstreizen en bij inkomende bezoeken. Ik wil ook de dialoog met kerkelijke leiders voortzetten') (Minister for Development Cooperation and International Trade 2014). Currently, a parliamentarian and founder of She Decides, Ploumen continues to stress its cultural and religious norms in particular that hinder women from speaking about topics such as abortion or access services if they need them ('sommige culturele of religieuze normen maken dat vrouwen er niet over durven te spreken, laat staan hulp te zoeken') (She Decides 2019).

The KCRD engaged in conversations on religion and sexuality with Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) staff when minister Ploumen was in office. The interest in religion among those diplomats and civil servants working on SRHR was clear.

The KCRD organised a public seminar in November 2013 that explored examples of engagement with religious actors around SRHR, to open up the conversation beyond seeing religious actors as the opposition only. In 2014 and 2015, the KCRD was invited by the MFA to organise a series of lectures and workshops on religion and sexuality to continue conversations. The KCRD brought in religious leaders and scholars from the networks of the founding organisations to share their insights and experiences on how religious actors fight for social and gender justice in the Global South. The lectures address cases of religious actors addressing gender-based violence, promoting sexual health and well-being, and a call for the inclusion of people of all sexes, sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions. In the course of the series, however, it became increasingly clear that the primary concerns among MFA staff remained with how religious actors could be engaged to counter conservative agendas on gender and sexuality. In that sense, the series did not address a direct need of the MFA staff, while at the same time it was not possible for the KCRD nor the MFA to invite these conservative actors as part of the series. Interestingly, this resulted in a critique on the KCRD for focusing too much on liberal religious actors, while the authority of these actors was questioned. It is perhaps no surprise that this created a deadlock for the KCRD in its interaction with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

There are two dimensions on which this deadlock should be evaluated. Firstly, it needs to be acknowledged that the KCRD occupied a position that was questioned, as the support base of founding organisations and participating NGOs had often chosen a middle position between conservative religious voices and secular liberal voices regarding SRHR or even aligned themselves more with the secular approach (cf. Grotenhuis 2014). Religious actors who found themselves in opposition to the Dutch policies on SRHR (and were therefore seen as conservative or hindering) were not part of the networks and not interested to engage in the KCRD activities. As pointed out before, the founding organisations had initiated the KCRD because of the need to revive their religious identities.

However, this focused on the secular development actors and not on addressing the challenges of religious and theological differences between the liberal and conservative positions within and between their own faith traditions and denominations. One could say that the KCRD promoted a rather secularised version of religion, one that focused more on emphasising the value-add of religion from an outsider's position, rather than speaking from a positioning as faith actor within a particular faith tradition.

Secondly, we want to note that the concerns over religio-political actors who hinder people's access to SRHR are

genuine concerns. The experience of opposition to the advancement of SRHR – also referred to as the 'unholy alliance' – is very real for those who represent the MFA at the Commission on the Status of Women or the Commission on Population and Development (Berro Pizzarossa 2018; Hulme 2010). However, the space for engagement with religious actors in the MFA is limited because of a strong emphasis on the separation of religion and politics in the organisational culture and in the Dutch public discourse in which engagement with religion easily attracts suspicion and critique. This means that in the particular setup of the lecture series, for both the MFA and the KCRD, it was only possible to invite actors who were both liberal and Christian.

The example of the collaboration of the KCRD with the Dutch MFA around religion and SRHR illustrates one of the 'dead-ends' for religion and development advocacy as formulated by Olivier (2016). It shows that shifting secular discourses is incredibly challenging because the powerful secular framing of development only allows religion to be an instrument or a hindrance to realising development outcomes. The level of reflexivity needed to create a more complex and nuanced understanding on the roles of religious actors in relation to SRHR was limited on all sides, and therefore unintendedly the project resulted in a reproduction of the opposition between secular and religious approaches to SRHR, reaffirming the secular as the best.

## **Internal dynamics: Religious diversity and challenges of difference**

In this section, we reflect on the internal dynamics in the KCRD, and its struggles to promote religion as a relevant factor in a secular context while having to navigate the internal power dynamics in the centre.

As the KCRD was initiated as a multi-faith centre, it was important from the start to engage Muslim and Hindu development organisations that had emerged within the larger minority religious groups in the Netherlands. During the 1980s and the 1990s, migrant communities and their descendants in the Netherlands had initiated platforms and organisations to channel funds for local community development, often in their countries of origin. These platforms and organisations often did not meet the same standards of professionalism as the Christian (and non-religious) development organisations that had accessed government funding and professionalised their approaches for decades. Yet, as a sign of their increasing vocality and upward social mobility, some of the faith-based civil society organisations that were set up in minority communities joined the KCRD (Hindu organisation SEVA, and the Muslim organisation Islamic Relief Netherlands and the consortium of migrant organisations, DCMO). In turn, these minority organisations regarded the KCRD as a vehicle for emancipation and recognition in the field of development, including access to funding.

Within the KCRD, the absolute equality of the organisations was always affirmed. However, the different levels of professionalism pointed created a particular power dynamic between the government-funded organisations and the migrant or religious minority organisations. Firstly, even though declining Christian constituencies were affecting the support based on the Protestant and Catholic organisations that were members of the KCRD, these organisations could still claim to represent significant proportions of the Dutch population because of their embeddedness in existing institutional structures. Yet, such structures were virtually non-existent when it comes to migrant communities and their descendants, and these organisations often experienced that they could not easily access such structures because of their different levels of professionalism. The consortium of migrant organisations (DCMO) was, for example, not able to access funding independently in the co-funding scheme of the Dutch government between 2011 and 2015, and its member organisations had to rely on funding channelled through the larger NGOs. In the context of the KCRD, it became increasingly clear that migrant and religious minority development organisations find themselves in a trap. Because the organisations run programmes with volunteers rather than professional staff, they are not part of the formal evaluation processes that government-funded NGOs engage in. On the other hand, in an article in a professional magazine, parliamentarian Amma Assante and the director of a small NGO working in Indonesia Sam Pormes explain that migrant and religious minority FBOs are not able to proof the effectiveness of their programmes and, as a consequence, they are denied access to funding in a new round (Meulen 2012). Therefore, there exists a historical-structural inequality because Christian organisations could lean on institutions that grew along with the establishment of Dutch civil society as a whole. Unfortunately, the multiple privileges and mechanisms of exclusion could not be mended by the KCRD. Rather, the different levels of professionalism, sustained by particular institutional arrangements and access to funding, reaffirmed the privilege of Christian organisations compared to non-Christian FBOs.

The KCRD also struggled with addressing Christian privilege internally, as it posed considerable obstacles to the acclaimed 'absolute equality' within the KCRD as interreligious centre. It is important to note that Christian privilege and unequal power relations among faith-based actors are not only particular to the funding structures for international development, but are also entangled with the construction of religion and secularism in Western Europe (Knibbe & Bartelink 2019). The historical production of Islam as Europe's significant other has crucial implications (Mapril et al. 2017). In particular, after September 11 attacks, Muslim development organisations often see themselves as operating in a Christian world in which they are seen as morally suspect, and adopt a strategy of secularisation to navigate suspicion and securitisation (Barnet & Stein 2012). This means they downplay their religious profiles and are not likely to address the inequalities they experience in the societal or institutional contexts in which they operate in the Netherlands.

While on several occasions, the underlying and inevitable differences between the organisations became apparent within the KCRD, this never led to an actual confrontation because of the importance of securing an over-arching ideology of inter-religious tolerance and understanding. While understandable in terms of the KCRD's focus on development in contexts far from Europe, we consider it a weaker aspect of the KCRD's work that it did not embark on an in-depth exploration on the power dynamics around religion in relation to minority or majority dynamics in the Netherlands. The differences between faith-based development actors therefore merely emerged as a difference in professional standards.

## Conclusion

This article discussed the work of the KCRD in the Netherlands as an example of religion and development advocacy. It aimed to deepen insight into how religion and development advocacy by FBOs often contributes to reproducing the religious–secular binary in discourses on modernity and development. Building on the case of the KCRD, this article demonstrated that religion and development advocacy is most successful when focusing on those instances in which religion causes uneasiness with mainstream secularism. However, this also means that such initiatives are often unable to challenge secular biases on religion, including the religious–secular binary.

The findings sections in this article demonstrate that the Dutch KCRD initially developed an ambitious agenda of transforming development to become more holistic and inclusive, while having to grapple with the instrumental logic that dominated much of its thinking and practice. Secondly, the article outlined how the KCRD struggled to address the ways in which secularism is entangled into the dynamics of polarisation around religion and SRHR in the Netherlands. Finally, it discussed the religious majority or minority dynamics in the KCRD itself, where the KCRD – focussed on changing secular discourse to become more religion inclusive – failed to address the structural inequalities and their implications in its own set-up. The urge to instrumentalise religion to prove the legitimacy of this perspective within the existing development discourse has created a deadlock and despite its efforts and best intentions KCRD could not make the impact that was originally intended.

Attempts to re-write the secular script of development are hindered by the constant default into an instrumental mode. Faith-based organisations, most notably the Christian organisations that founded the KCRD, are not the exception but in their own ways struggle with this utilitarian orientation in development.

Despite their ascribed and self-acclaimed insiders' position, faith-based development organisations contribute to instrumentalising religion while failing to challenge unequal power relations within the faith-based development sector.

Initiatives on religion and development (in particular those based in Western Europe) that aim to broaden a merely instrumental approach and contribute to realising a more inclusive and holistic development practice are therefore advised to engage more courageously with the challenging questions and underlying structural inequalities of religious or secular, inter- and intra-faith relations in the cultural contexts of Western Europe. This starts with creating a more inclusive and holistic practice in its own institutional set-up. This also means that development organisations should not only focus their attention on the Global South. Their efforts also need to be anchored in mainstream discussions affecting societies in the Global North, including their own organisations and platforms, in order to not conveniently leave inequality as a problem of 'others'.

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## Authors' contributions

The article is written by B.E.B. in consultation with T.G., who contributed towards developing the outline and argument and reviewed several versions of the article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for carrying out research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

This article reflects the independent views of the authors and not necessarily those of the institutions with which both authors are affiliated.

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