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Performing 'Religiousness': Negotiations of Religion and the Formation of Identity in Guyanese Development Organisations

Introduction

In the multi-ethnic and multi-religious society of Guyana, organisations engaged in development or humanitarian work define themselves as faith-based, non-governmental or both. While the category 'non-governmental' exists and is applied specifically among political leaders, the classification of being 'religious' or of doing religion is of greater significance to most organisations as well as to most charismatic leaders, religious practitioners and lay people. They frequently highlight that 'religious organisations' are those that 'talk about' religion and seek to convert. Classifications of specific organisations are thus not exclusively linked to doctrinal foundations or notions of faith and belief, but furthermore to performative practices. Similar to a person's process of identity formation, the creation of an organisation's or a group's identity is perceived as relational, influenced by the various socio-historical contexts, as well as by the self-ascription and ascriptions of others. From a Guyanese perspective it is based on both performative and essential notions of identity. This article therefore discusses processes of identity formation in and of organisations conducting development or humanitarian work in the specific local context of Guyana, raising the following questions: What is the relevance of being labelled and identified as religious in the context of development work? How do perceptions of doing and performing religion influence the work and identity of a development organisation?

I argue that although organisations may not consider themselves or their practices as religious, social actors and groups may interpret this differently on the basis of divergent definitions of religion and notions of which practices are labelled as religious. I conclude that any answer to the question, 'Does religion make a difference in development work?' has to consider the different and specific contexts of local communities, and cannot be generalized. To understand the specific conditions of the case study, I first analyse how Guyanese (re)construct ethno-religious group

identities and may classify development organisations as 'religious'. This, I argue in the second part, is also based on the relevance of action in the conceptualization of religion, as religion does not simply reflect doctrines, theology and beliefs, but is also performed. In the final part I elaborate on how this interpretation and evaluation of the doing of religion may influence the labelling (and hence efficacy) of development organisations as either religious or spiritual.

Group Identity and the Identification of Development Organisations

The buzzing community centre is filled with visitors, seated in rows on plastic chairs. Children play on the floor and on their parents' laps, volunteer staff hands out *channa* (a dish of chick peas) and sweet drinks, and a camera team documents the events of the medical outreach programme to post the material soon or immediately on social media. It is a noisy gathering in the otherwise quiet backstreet of the residential area in rural Guyana; the sound of fans, which stir the humid air, an organizer, who shouts registration numbers of patients into a microphone, and the voices of approximately one hundred people combine on this Thursday afternoon in August 2015. Vijay[1], who is managing the event together with his wife Shirley, sits down next to me in a shaded corner of the property's front yard to explain the proceedings of the medical outreach programme. Vijay is one of the founding members and on the executive board of the Nirvana Humanitarian Society (Nirvana) that owns the community building and that co-hosts the programme together with the Save Abee Foundation (Save Abee). Nirvana is a not-for-profit organisation that was established as a cultural and humanitarian organisation by Guyanese migrants in the USA in 1997. In Guyana it provides "assistance to the poor and relief to victims of disasters, help[s to] promote educational opportunities for economically deprived children, support[s] programs to assist abused children and women, sponsor[s] and encourage[s] programs and activities that allow for the development of art, drama and music"[2]. Similarly, Save Abee was registered in the USA in 2010 as a non-profit organisation, operating especially in rural areas of Guyana. Initially, the organisation opened a centre for children, where computer education classes were provided. Over the past years Save Abee has diversified its projects, which now include, for instance, medical outreach programmes and distributions of clothes and toys. Vijay is

1 All names have been changed to ensure my informants' anonymity.
2 http://www.nirvanausa.org (last accessed, 24 January 2017).

in his forties, was born and raised in Guyana, but moved to the USA in the 1990s, where he lives in Florida and works at a bank. Together with Shirley he travels to Guyana two or three times a year to embark on what they call a 'working holiday', spending their leave on 'helping people and children in Guyana' and thus on 'serving humanity' (personal interview). The collaboration of Nirvana and Save Abee is based on a friendship among the founding members, and both organisations are run by Guyanese who have migrated to the USA, where a majority of funding is generated through ticket sales for popular events and cultural shows that they organize. During the bustling proceedings in the community centre, of which Vijay keeps track and in which he occasionally intervenes while we converse, he lays out the organisations' objectives and aims: the basic objective, he explains, is to improve the living conditions of Guyanese in the coastal countryside through development work and humanitarian efforts. He emphasizes that while Nirvana and Save Abee were originally focused on advancing children's computing skills, they now additionally offer scholarships to university students as 'part of development' (personal interview). Both organisations also engage in what he labels as humanitarian projects, including the restoration of houses and the provision of medical services. Although he refers to 'humanitarian' and 'development' work, he does not apply these terms as distinct concepts and practices but refers to them as intricate aspects of social work. To him and most of my informants, the differentiation of humanitarian and development work is irrelevant, a differentiation that reflects a 'Western' distinction and bias of different kinds of 'support' or 'aid', often differentiated along the lines of (material) disaster relief support and (immaterial) advocacy as support for sustainable development. This (non)differentiation is relevant, as it indicates the different understandings of development in the Guyanese context. Here, the notion of holistic development is commonly addressed, which differs from the Western notion of development, emphasizing the necessity of spirituality, as discussed in the following.

Vijay's and my conversation took place as part of my anthropological study that I conducted in the capital Georgetown and two rural communities in Guyana, particularly in the region of East Coast Demerara, for four months in 2015. For the purpose of analysing the influence of ethno-religious identities on local concepts of development, I engaged in ethnographic fieldwork consisting of participant observation and ethnographic interviews. Throughout this research I was able to rely on earlier fieldwork experiences and interviews conducted between 2011 and 2013 for my analysis of transnational Hindu communities and the construction of Indian

ethnic identity in Guyana (Kloß 2016). Asking Vijay in this interview what he perceives to be development, he–like many other Guyanese informants–elaborates on the difference between material and spiritual development, and that both processes are mutually dependent on each other (Kloß 2020). According to him, material development cannot exist without 'spiritual development' and vice versa. Like many of my informants, he uses the notion of holistic development. With holistic development he refers to the understanding that any kind of sustainable development has to necessarily include spiritual enhancement and achievements, such as the creation of personal merit or the transformation of one's 'mindset'. These are a necessity to make material improvement and expansion effective and are often lacking in Western notions of development. In this context, he differentiates between material and spiritual development, but does not oppose these processes as different but interdependent. He explains that Nirvana and Save Abee are particularly interested in 'developing' the arts, indicating the notion and relevance of spiritual development to the organisations' work. He particularly emphasizes the need to host and organize cultural programmes along the coast, as the majority of the rural population 'has no distraction'; a problem especially for young adults and children, who due to a lack of alternatives may start to engage in drinking, smoking marijuana or criminal activities. Few people can afford to travel to Georgetown regularly, where they could become part of a band or perform in dance events or concerts. According to him, people in town furthermore have 'their own people' to perform, usually the 'rich people', so even if a person may be able to afford the cost of travelling, he or she would find it almost impossible to become part of an artistic group there. Nirvana and Save Abee thus frequently offer music and dancing classes and host theatre and musical shows in the villages, which are usually sold out and have become part of the organisations' fundraising. Vijay points out that he and other volunteers direct these programmes towards all people, regardless of their race or religion. This is a brief but meaningful comment that indicates local power dynamics and tensions within the Guyanese population, as discussed in detail later.

Vijay and most of the other volunteers are Hindus. Various traditions of Hinduism have developed in Guyana, which have been maintained and transformed since the arrival of the approximately 240,000 indentured laborers from India between 1838 and 1917 (Nath 1950; van der Veer, Vertovec 1991; Tinker 1993; Bisnauth 2000). In the predominantly Christian society of colonial British Guiana, Hindus have formed the minority. To achieve upward social mobility in the colonial society and to create

'respectable' status, Hindus and other non-Christians had to convert to Christianity, a practice considered as a threat to the maintenance of Indian identity and Hindu traditions in the community. Converts were often considered to be nominal Christians and were derogatorily called 'belly Christians' or 'rice Christians', terms indicating that a Hindu had converted to Christianity for material benefits (Jayawardena 1966; 1963). Narratives of discrimination and hardship remain intricate aspects of Hindu identity and collective memory in contemporary Guyana. Hindus continue to be a minority, constituting only 24.8 % of the Guyanese population in 2012 (Bureau of Statistics 2016: 32). In comparison, 63.9 % of the population is Christian and 6.8 % is Muslim (ibid.). My informants frequently narrate stories of Christian missionaries, who actively proselytize Hindus. For instance, Omadatt, who is a 43-year-old *pujari* (priest of the Guyanese Hindu 'Madras tradition') and who lives with his family in a rural area of eastern Guyana, explains in a conversation about his work:

> "But, on our religion particularly there was a victimization, whereby we were not allowed to worship freely. And a lot of the people were forced to become Christians. Most of our books was destroyed, because as our fore-parents came to this country, (…), well they didn't know how long they were gonna live here, so whatever of their religious text, they walk with them, but they were not allow to pray, they were not allow to worship. All they was allow to just to go and work and... and their living conditions was terrible. So there was a lot of, you know, *discrimination* (...)." (personal interview)[3]

Struggles for resources and high-status positions have resulted in inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts in the multi-religious and multi-ethnic Guyanese society. This development is reflected and reconstituted through the ethno-politicization of the Guyanese political system (Hintzen 2008; Garner 2008; Hinds 2011; Bissessar, La Guerre 2013). In this context, even religious denominations are identified with a particular ethnic group: Hinduism and Islam are considered Indian, Christianity predominantly as African, an aspect which I discuss in more detail later. Therefore, conversion from Hinduism to Christianity was and is conceived as a threat to the maintenance of the Indian community and its capacity to acquire or maintain economic and political power. Proselytization and conversion are highly charged topics in Guyana, and whenever the topic of development and religion was discussed my informants would almost instantly address questions of power and dominance. They usually linked development or social welfare programmes to processes and practices of creating a partic-

3 Interview excerpts are transcribed verbatim and often include Guyanese Creole.

ular ethno-religious group's dominance over another. For example, when Vijay of Nirvana addresses the topic of conversion, he eagerly explains that there are specific Christian groups that convert people 'wholesale' and are particularly active in the *interior* (Guyanese hinterland, usually remote areas). He describes that one Nirvana volunteer, who used to work in the interior, had witnessed how 'Christian groups' provided material support and medical services only to Christians or people who will 'turn' Christian. According to this volunteer, Vijay states, a Christian group had been offering medical eye tests, but those who wanted to have their eyes checked had to convert to Christianity first. He does not specify which Christian group the volunteer referred to.

For the purpose of this analysis it is irrelevant to find out whether such practices are indeed conducted or not. It is more significant to analyse how, for instance, Vijay defines his organisation in relation to another group, e.g. proselytizing Christian groups, and how he distances it from them in order to establish morally higher and more respectable means of doing development. As processes of identity formation among individuals and in groups are based on processes of othering (Hall 1996, 2000), this creation of opposition is no surprise: all social groups are socially constructed and exist only in relation to each other (Banks 1996). Groups and group identity are established through the definition of constitutive others, as the definition of self necessarily requires the definition of an 'other'. Processes of group identity formation include the construction of inner-group similarities on the one hand and the identification of differences in relation to the opposed 'other' on the other hand. In Guyana and in the Guyanese diaspora, these processes are intricate in the construction of ethnic groups and, as indicated earlier, particularly the 'Indian' and 'African' ethnic groups are constructed in opposition to each other (Premdas 1992, 1994, 1996; Ramey 2011). Here, ethnic groups base their definitions of ethnic identity on descent and sociocultural practices. For instance, the Indian group usually describes a descent from Indian indentured labourers as a key aspect of being Indian, while members of the African group consider enslaved Africans to be their ancestors.

This ethnic identification must not be considered as marginal, but it influences and extends to all aspects of social, political and economic life in contemporary Guyana. It is not only people that are identified on the basis of ethnicity such as Indian or African, but furthermore events, residential areas, villages, places of worship and religious groups (Kloß 2016). Even political parties are defined as and sometimes actively engage in identifying along ethnic lines, taking advantage of and advancing the process of ethno-

politicization (Karran 2000, 2004; Misir 2001; Garner 2008; Hinds 2011). In the current social environment, it is impossible for any Guyanese political party to overcome its identification as either Indian or African. For example, when a party includes members of the 'other' ethnic group and provides them with leading or representative positions in order to claim a multi-ethnic identity, such inclusions usually do not have a long-lasting effect. As I have witnessed during the 2011 and 2015 national election campaigns, they usually lead to more general discussions about how the alleged representatives of 'other' ethnic groups, who have become party members, are 'not really' Indian or African. In the same line of argumentation, any organisation active in Guyana is labelled on the basis of ethnicity, including development and humanitarian organisations. Even international organisations that are not run by the Guyanese are commonly considered to be working in favour of one ethnic group or the other. This classification takes place despite an organisation's often continuous effort of inclusive social work.

Ethnic identities are massively influenced by religious identities and cannot be considered distinct. Hinduism and Islam are considered Indian religions in Guyana, and hence consolidate Indian ethnic identity, and consequently have to be understood as ethnic religions (van der Veer, Vertovec 1991). Christian denominations, on the other hand, are predominantly associated with African, Mixed and Portuguese groups (Bureau of Statistics 2016). The majority of the population therefore considers an organisation run by Hindus to be working in favour of the Indian ethnic group, regardless of its efforts and proclamations to work towards the benefit of all Guyanese. In the specific case of Nirvana, the mention of the Sanskrit term Nirvana and a self-description referring to the 'promotion of humanitarian and *Indo*-Caribbean cultural activities'[4] solidifies this assumption and emphasizes identification with the Indian ethnic group. Save Abee, which is Guyanese Creole and translates to 'Save us', is similarly linked to the Indian community through the use of 'abee'. In this context, any development organisation has to take the influence of local classifications and processes of identity formation into account as well as the fact that identities are neither fixed nor stable. Processes of identity formation are never complete, but are processual and contextual. Not only does a group's self-definition influence and transform its identity, but an outsiders' categorization of the organisation does also. Beneficiaries' classifications and ascriptions are often neglected in analyses of development work, a neglect that may lead to

4 Emphasis added; cf. http://www.nirvanausa.org (last accessed, 24 January 2017).

the non-observance of their agency and one-sided analyses of identity formation, resulting in misunderstandings and inefficiency on the ground.

In addition, one has to consider that actions and specific modes of behaviour are part of identity constructions both at the individual and the group levels. For instance, despite my efforts of not being solely identified with the Indian or Hindu ethno-religious group, my conviction and attitude was difficult to convey to my informants throughout my research. Having been based in an Indian-Hindu family during and after my long-term doctoral fieldwork, engaging mostly though decidedly not exclusively with the Hindu community and attending numerous Hindu celebrations and ceremonies, some Indians and Africans automatically considered me as 'in favour' of the Indian-Hindu community. Most Guyanese found this involvement and interest of a White European and hence presumably Christian woman somewhat odd. They interpreted my behaviour in different ways, however. Friends and acquaintances jokingly but consistently commented that I was not a Christian missionary, who can be commonly found in rural Guyana, but a Hindu missionary by showing my respect to Hindu traditions. Sometimes, and usually among members of my extended host family, some people suggested that in my previous life I 'must have been an Indian' or that I must be the reincarnated soul of their hence Indian deceased child. Although I interpreted these comments as expressions of closeness and intimacy at first, upon reflection they also indicated their perception of my potential or hidden Indian-ness.

To my informants, the identity of a person or (ethno-religious) group is based on both essential and performative aspects. In this context, my ambiguity of being White but performatively (also) Indian was linked to an understanding of essential and performative constructions of ethno-religious identities. As discussed elsewhere, Guyanese interpret ethnic identities on the basis of both essential traits and performative practices, which are interdependent and influence each other (Kloß 2016). According to them, a person may be inherently or 'essentially' Indian. This means that his or her Indian-ness is based on biology and ancestral origins that are "genetically transmitted" (Williams 1991: 57). On the other hand, a person's Indian-ness is also constructed through his or her actions and performances. A person is only considered 'Indian' if he or she acts or 'does' Indian (Kloß 2016, 2017). Performances are regarded as indicators of a person's essential self. Similarly, a person only does or acts Indian, if there is a genealogical link to Indian ancestry. This link may be known or unknown, visible or hidden. In her ethnography on Guyanese society, Brackette Williams accordingly docu-

ments how her informants explained or indicated that "what is in the 'blood' will sooner or later show in one's behavior" (Williams 1991: 57).

To my informants, 'being' and 'doing' are not separate but intricately linked modalities. Neither exists without the other. On the basis of performance, one's ethnicity is not only revealed but affirmed and (re)constituted. In this context, my self-identification as White, atheist, non-Christian but spiritual varied from my informants' interpretations. My actions indicated that I was situated somewhere in between Christianity and Hinduism, and to them these actions revealed my hidden or inherited Indian-ness. While I could have easily dismissed these interpretations as wrong or as misinterpretations, as a social anthropologist who does not simply reject informants' interpretations as wrong or as belief opposing it to knowledge, over time these interpretations have affected my identity and self-perception; hence my personal process of identity formation and the research I set out to do, transforming my social relations. Simlarly, I argue, that a group's or development organisation's identity is influenced and transformed by 'other' interpretations and ascriptions, and a non-recognition or denial of this will negatively affect its work within a community. It is insufficient to point out that beneficiaries are wrong and to continue to defend internally defined identities as 'true' or 'authentic'.

My informants interpret and identify organisations hence also on the basis of their actions. Talking to Vijay at the medical outreach programme about the proselytization strategy of Christian groups in the interior, I ask him if Nirvana and Save Abee have intentions of promoting Hinduism as well. Vijay immediately negates, emphatically exclaiming: 'No, we are not religious! We don't talk of religion!' Although this response is no surprise to me, as most organisations do not want to be labelled as proselytizing in Guyana, the way Vijay indirectly defines 'religious' here and in other contexts is noteworthy. According to him, not being religious means to 'not talk of religion' a definition that takes action as its key factor. From this perspective, if an organisation is religious, it actively promotes a specific religion by talking about it. Numerous informants including beneficiaries express similar interpretations. They understand the label 'religious organisation' to refer to organisations that focus on actions directed at proselytization. When an organisation is classified as 'religious', this label implies or reveals specific political and economic motives that are to the benefit of the particular denomination. Such action is viewed suspiciously in the ethnically-tense context of Guyana, where the notion of religion often has ambiguous connotations, as discussed in the next section.

Religiousness and the Doing of Religion

What is perceived as religious varies in different contexts and over time, and when raising the question of the relevance of religion in development work it has to be kept in mind that there is not a universal interpretation and definition of religious or religion. The following questions thus have to be addressed to understand if religion or the doing of religion make a difference in development work: Who and which organisation is considered religious? What does this label imply? The specificity of local contexts and local definitions of religion have to be taken into consideration. Religion is no thing that exists in itself or that is out there and acts or does things, but is done by social actors (Nye 2000). Instead of analysing which actions may or may not be labelled as religious, it may be more useful to consider religion as something that is done. Rather than thinking about religion merely in terms of belief and believing, for the Guyanese context it seems more appropriate to remind oneself that religiosity may also be performed and manifested "through ethno-religious identity and tradition" (Nye 2000: 209), and that, for example, a performance of Indian-ness may also be considered as part of religion in the specific Guyanese context. Performative (re)creations of and the belief in religion, henceforth referred to as 'religiousness' in reference to my informants, are processes and modes of being and doing religion. Religion is not only based on thinking, but includes action, a consideration necessary to not reproduce a dichotomy of thought and action, mind and body. Religion does not simply reflect doctrines, theology and beliefs, but it is also performed. The emphasis on 'religion as belief' (Nye 2000: 206ff), which derives from and is influenced by Western discourse, is linked to the differentiation and hierarchization of thought and action, belief and performance, with an often inherent devaluation of action and performance. I do not argue that the Guyanese do not differentiate between thought and action, but propose that it is necessary to keep both aspects, belief and performance, in mind when discussing the relevance of religion in development work. Religion is an embodied practice, and hence the question of how specific organisations 'do religion' has to be raised. It is insufficient to merely look at self-definitions of organisations and how they apply various secular or religious identities to acquire funding, but it is necessary to consider how being identified as 'religious' impacts and affects the doing of development work. If an organisation is identified as religious in a community and whether this is evaluated as positive or negative depends on the local and socio-historical context.

Numerous Guyanese hesitated to label themselves as religious during my research. They were often informants who considered themselves to be spiritual people and who opposed religion to a 'way of life'. For instance, Pujari Omadatt explains:

> "But for me basically, the worshipping is a way of life! It's not really a religion for me, in a sect, but it is a way of life, is a way of how people *live*. (…) So my experience in this worshipping, is that it more, it's more for us as a *living*, as a daily life, living, than being oriented as a *religion*." (personal interview)

Frequently my informants stressed the particular relevance of actions and deeds in these 'ways of life or living', explaining that although you may claim that you believe in the divine or that you are spiritual, a person can only prove this through his or her actions. They often explained that, 'Only thinking and believing does not make you a spiritual or religious person'. To the majority of my informants there are not separate religious and secular spheres of life. While Guyanese Hindus regard the dichotomy between religious and secular as a Christian concept, Guyanese Christians, particularly members of Pentecostal groups, similarly question this differentiation. Only a minority, mostly within the younger urban population, claim a secular, atheist or agnostic identity. To the majority of my informants, no practice is secular, and a denial of spirituality as a necessity for development would thus ultimately lead to failure in development work (Kloß 2019). They consider spirituality as an intricate aspect of development; as something that is performatively created.[5] As there are neither secular spheres of life nor secular actions, the opposition of secular and faith-based organisation is largely insignificant to my informants; all organisations are run by individuals and groups of people who necessarily belong to one or the other ethno-religious group. As faith and spirituality are ways of life, these are expressed through all kinds of actions. Accordingly, the Guyanese seldom raise the question of whether an organisation is faith-based or not, and, as indicated earlier, most organisations would reject being labelled 'religious'. This is due to a negative connotation and interpretation of the label 'religious' in the local context, discussed below. On the contrary, if they or any other person interpret their work as 'spiritual', this would express a more positive evalua-

5 The term and concept of development have been constructed by Western governments and policy makers as part of the modernization and secularization discourse of the late twentieth century. Development was aligned with secular and liberal priorities and, as Philip Fountain addresses, hence "came to be seen among mainstream actors as a distinctly secular, universal and virtually unquestionable moral good such that 'religious' development could be imagined as an abnormal intrusion" (Fountain 2013: 25).

tion, as spiritual implies that the organisation is not involved in divisive activities. This interpretation is based on the differentiation and politicization of the notions of 'religion' and 'spirituality' and an understanding that 'religion' reinforces division.

When opposed to spirituality, my informants often refer to religion as a kind of imposition, as a kind of exterior force. For example, a Hindu priest discussed this aspect with me in an interview, which included the topic of the religious environment of Guyana and the various local Hindu traditions. He states: 'And that's how I will always say that in the [Hindu] Devi Temple there is no religion being cast upon it, because it's everybody's right to be there' (personal interview). He conceives of religion as a kind of orthodox structure that is imposed on a community and that is 'cast upon' people. He refers to religion as something rather formal and potentially divisive, as it restricts access to specific groups of people. According to him, his own 'way of worshipping' or in general the notion of spirituality indicates a more inclusive approach that refers to processes emanating 'within' a group or person. Hence, he states, they are more natural and authentic in relation to the traditions that African and Indian people have practiced prior to having been colonized. Generally, 'religion' and 'religious' are highly politicized terms in Guyana, and when applied in an inter-religious or postcolonial context they may indicate and may be linked to political and economic power struggles. As I discuss elsewhere, the emphasis on spirituality and spiritual development is part of anti-imperial and anti-colonial discourse and practice, linked to anti-religious discourse (Kloß 2020). When an organisation's actions are labelled as 'religious' and distinguished from the more positive 'spiritual', the morality and respectability of this organisation is often challenged.

Conclusion

This case study has demonstrated that there is no universal answer or approach to the question whether religion helps or hinders the work of development organisations, as there are no universal categories of religion and development. Instead of trying to find definitions of religious NGOs or FBOs, specific challenges and benefits should be discussed that may advance when referring to (self)classifications of 'religious' or 'faith-based' in a specific context. The current discourse in development literature concerning the so-called resurgence of religion thus has to be critically reflected as Eurocentric bias, as religion has always been part of development (Foun-

tain 2013). Instead of merely raising the question, 'how much religion is appropriate in development work?', and a strong focus on donors and funding, the actual practices considered as (the doing of) religion have to be taken into serious consideration. Not only is it relevant as to how an organisation chooses to identify itself, but processes of identity formation vary within a given context and over time, and are also influenced by the definition and categorization of beneficiaries. Even though organisations may not consider themselves or their practices as religious, this may be interpreted differently among the different groups involved. Generally, the label 'religious' impacts how social actors and organisations are perceived and the ways they can influence and implement structures. How communities construct organisations as 'religious' or 'non-religious', and more generally what 'religion' implies in a specific social environment, is of major relevance when raising the question whether religion makes a difference in development work. In some communities it may imply that certain groups will avoid a 'religious' organisation and dismiss its work and influence as offensive. From the perspective of this organisation, religion thus becomes an obstacle with negative impacts. Hence, whether religion makes a difference or not depends on what kind of difference religion makes for actors on the ground. There cannot be a general answer to the question, 'does religion make a difference?', but the specificity of local contexts and societies always have to be considered.

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