

RELIGIOUS STUDIES and THEOLOGY EXPLORING SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT: CHALLENGES for HIGHER EDUCATION
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Paper Proposal (Abstract)

Titel: Religion and The Millennium Development Goals:
Two Patterns of Engagement
Author: Dr. Louke M. van Wensveen
Affiliation: Senior Researcher, Knowledge Centre Religion & Development (Oikos)

Although widely hailed as a historical milestone, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are also criticized for expressing a culturally thin understanding of sustainable development. In particular, they do not address religious dimensions of development, dimensions that a majority of the world's population would consider essential. The Knowledge Centre Religion & Development (KCRD) seeks to articulate a more sophisticated understanding of sustainable development by studying the roles of world religions in the praxis of development projects. In this paper I use recent work by members of the KCRD¹ to analyze whether and how research and education in religious studies can contribute to the MDGs. In addition, I draw on my own fifteen-year experience of incorporating sustainable development in theology courses at Loyola Marymount University (1988-2002) and at the Radboud University (Spring 1994).

I approach the *specific* question at hand, whether and how research and education in the study of religion can contribute to the MDGs, by means of a *general* typology of two historically rooted patterns of religion-SD engagement. The typology serves as a heuristic tool to identify and evaluate a range of research and education options.

In what I call the *Additive Pattern of Engagement* religion functions as an additive to sustainable development efforts. This pattern typically involves an ordered progression of: 1. High-level articulation of a univocal definition of SD (e.g., the Rio definition); 2. High-level SD goal-setting (e.g., the MDGs); 3. High-level specification of binding SD codes and metrics (e.g., the Global Reporting Initiative). Secular organizations and disciplines set the agenda; religious organizations and scholars of religion either play no role or are selectively invited to contribute.

¹ Four member organizations participate in the Knowledge Centre for Religion & Development: Cordaid, ICCO, Islamic University Rotterdam, Oikos, and Seva Network Foundation. The Knowledge Centre "seeks to put into practice the vision that religion is an important factor for sustainable development, international co-operation and civil society building. To reach that aim, the Knowledge Centre makes products and services available to development organisations and their partner-organisations, migrant organisations, academic institutes, media and political organisations." (<http://www.religie-en-ontwikkeling.nl>, May 29, 2007).

In the *Integral Pattern of Engagement* religion forms an integral part of three mutually interacting aspects of sustainable development, namely: 1. Visions of SD that emerge locally and may further evolve globally (e.g., the Earth Charter); 2. Sustainable local communities, which may also connect globally; 3. Sustainable personal virtues, embedded in local visions and communities (e.g., humility and care). Religious organizations, the KCRD, and scholars of religion and philosophy have drawn attention to these aspects of SD and their integral religious dimensions; secular organizations and other academic disciplines, for various reasons, tend not speak the same language.

In the paper I first describe and illustrate these two patterns of religion-SD engagement. For each pattern I subsequently identify and illustrate a range of matching foci for theological research and education. Next, I offer an evaluative comparison of the two patterns of engagement, based on criteria drawn from KCRD research as well as my own concerns. Finally, I spell out the implications of my assessment for the leading question of the paper, whether and how research and education in the study of religion can contribute to the Millennium Development Goals.