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Transformative Values

Religion and Capitalism and the new
Development Discourse in Eastern Africa

Irma Taddia
Tekeste Negash

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A preliminary version of these papers was discussed at the European Conference on African Studies (AEGIS) held in Uppsala in June 2011 in a special panel organized by Tekeste Negash and Irma Taddia as discussants. The overarching framework for the panel was the role of religion as a transformative value in the development discourse in Eastern Africa.

The main assumption of the panel was the role assigned to Protestant Christianity, described and explained at length by Max Weber on the spread and consolidation of capitalism in Europe and beyond. Though severely criticised both on empirical and theoretical grounds, Max Weber's study yet remains as a main point of departure for the analysis of the impact of religion on the development of the capitalist system [Weber M. 1964, 1992].

The complex and dynamic interconnectedness between religion and capitalism does not as Max Weber once argued limit itself only to Christianity but it embraces Islam as well. It is within this broadened view of the role of religion that the scope of the panel was conceived.

At one level the debate on the role of Protestant Christianity in the rise and development of capitalism and the corresponding debate on the failure or inability of Islam to transform the economic base of the space it occupies is being quickly subsumed by another new yet growing discourse. This new discourse that traces its origin to Walter Benjamin in the early 1920's [Benjamin, W., 1991] is now being forcefully argued by, among others, Christoph Deutschmann [Deutschmann, C., 2012] who maintains that capitalism has become the new religion, and perhaps the only religion quickly covering the entire human space, where Islam and the other world religions are of limited significance.

This new discourse, interesting as it might be does not in any way diminish the importance of case studies of the impact of religion both old and new in the development discourse on the margins of world economy. The panel on Religion and Capitalism in the new development discourse in Eastern Africa was designed precisely to capture the impact of the increasing role that Islam and charismatic Christianity are occupying in Eastern Africa.

Elena Vezzadini's paper revisits the discourse on the construction of modernity and the position assigned to Islam. The paper is an exhaustive review of the impact of the writings of Max Weber in the construction of the West as the fountain and source of modernity (no matter how this confusing concept is defined) and the rest of the world in general and the Islamic world in particular. Vezzadini then proceeds to first synthesise and then analyse the most relevant works of Ernest Gellner [Gellner, E., 1981, 1983, 1992] and Shmuel Eisenstadt [Eisenstadt, 1999, 2000, 2003] on modernity as it was developed and espoused in the west and its repercussions on the rest of the world. Vezzadini appears to argue that Gellner further elaborated and thus perpetuated the Eurocentric views of Max Weber on European supremacy as the founder of Modernity. In contrast to Gellner, Eisenstadt appears to argue that the expansion of Modernity from the West to the rest of the world is bound to produce a different kind of modernity phenomena heavily conditioned by the religious and cultural landscape.

The type of modernity that we find in the Middle East and the rest of the world is not a distorted modernity nor can we argue of failed/delayed modernity. The phenomenon that we perceive in the Middle East and other places, Eisenstadt describes as other forms of modernity (which for convenience sake describes as multiple modernities). In other words there is not only one modernity but multiple modernities.

The textual and theoretical analysis on religion, capitalism and modernity as the resultant fusion of religion and politics on the one hand and the ethnocentric bias that permeated and still permeates western scholarship is being challenged by the intellectual elite from outside Europe. Valeria Saggiomo's paper on Islamic NGOs and their notion of development provides an excellent introduction into the intricate relations between Islam and Capitalism. Saggiomo's paper is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the current discourse on Islam and capitalism where the subject is broached by Muslim theoreticians. The second part deals with the Islamic/Muslim international NGOs and their notions of development as these are reflected in Somalia. Both parts of the paper deal with Islam and capitalism or rather the capitalist mode of production.

Saggiomo's paper demonstrates that our knowledge on Islam and Capitalism is much richer than what it was when Maxime Rodinson produced his masterpiece on the subject [Rodinson, 1966]. It can be argued that the Islamic NGOs were blueprints of the Western International NGOs, but that would be far from the truth. The principles that guide Islamic international NGOs are firmly anchored in the tenets of Islam as she explained in a previous work [Saggiomo, V., 2011]. Notions of development that have been put forward by scholars deeply imbued in Islam (as opposed to Max Weber whose knowledge of Islam was based on secondary readings) are not different from those developed in the Western hemisphere with its knowledge ecology.

Daria Zizzola's essay focuses on how Islam is being used as an instrument for the development of alternative capitalism. The issues that Zizzola tackles could indeed be considered as pointers to an alternative development where the basic tenets of Islam (Zakat and Awqaf – alms and charitable endowments respectively) [Habib, A., 2004, 2007] are fused with the financial resources pouring from the Diaspora and International Aid. Somaliland has yet to gain an international recognition of statehood although it had existed as a de facto independent state since 1991.

The failure or reluctance of the International community to recognise Somaliland as an independent state has not always been negative. The Somali people are forced to make the best use of the situation they find themselves and have hence been forced to develop the economy and the society along values and policies from multiple sources, the main of which is Islam.

Zizzola reconstructs the organisation of the health sector in an environment with many external actors but with very little presence of governmental apparatus. The result is the Manhal Specialised Hospital within the Hargeysa General Hospital. Managed and run by a non profit association, the Manhal Hospital has succeeded to access funds from many different sources and thus provide a service to the entire community. Patients pay according to their ability and those who are unable to afford are taken care free of charge.

It is the combination of the teaching of Islam (put in practice through Zakat and Awqaf) and the inner logic of private accumulation and the considerable presence of international aid that are the prime movers of the development process taking place in Somaliland. The absence of government and governmental apparatus do certainly affect the quality and spread of the service both in education and health but the general situation is not as bleak as one might imagine.

Karin Pallaver's essay explores the economic bases of Eastern African Muslim communities before the direct European colonial assault. Well organised and executed, Pallaver demonstrates that the East African coast (already Islamized by the beginning of the second millennium) was an integral part of the Indian Ocean Trade networks. Goods were imported and exported, wealth was made but not in a scale that would enable us to carry out deep studies on social structures as a result of trade and economic exchanges with the Indian Ocean World.

The economic base anchored on long-distance trade was shared by Muslim and non-Muslim Africans. Yet wealth accumulated via trade was not used to produce more wealth, and the main reason has very little to do with the presence or absence of religion but with the nature of the trade itself. East African communities exported raw materials and they got beads, cloth and other trinkets from the outside world. Pallaver's essay does not only deal with the dynamics of trade and the political life in Eastern Africa (present day Tanzania). However, her essay illuminates the ingenuity of traders crisscrossing the interior of Africa using human porters as the main means of transport for both imported and exported goods.

A salient feature of Pallaver's research is the readiness of the Muslim communities in Eastern Africa to participate in the global economy that emerged after the end of the formal transoceanic slave trade around the middle of the 19th century. Europe and the West demanded ivory from the hinterlands of Eastern Africa and the communities responded according to the logic of Capital. The resource base was fully explored, labour was mobilised and the end product was delivered to the trading stations. Goods were transported by human porters (in the absence of mules and oxen due too the tsetse fly that killed them) over huge distances (several hundred kilometres) according to wages and compensation terms accepted by traders and merchants.

An underlying issue that Pallaver did not include into her study is the demographic base of Eastern Africa during the second half of the 19th century. The scarcity of population and hence the absence of

population pressure has ever since the pioneering study of Esther Boserup [Boserup, 1985, 1990] been taken as the main factor in the slow growth of the factors of production – hence the growth of capitalism as a dominant mode of relations.

Silvia Bruzzi's paper is tangentially engaged with religion and capitalism probably for a number of good reasons. The constituent elements of capitalism (the exploitation of capital, labour and resources for private or collective gain) was not created in Europe but has existed in nearly all the continents and long before the rise of capitalism in Europe. What distinguished the European version of Capitalism was its ability to expand aided by the technologies of war, transportation and medicine. Bruzzi's paper discusses the role of a religious order (the Khatmiyya brotherhood) that was very dominant in present day Eritrea and northeast Sudan from the early 19th century until the middle of the 20th century. The Khatmiyya brotherhood was led by the el-Mirgani family who are alleged to descend from the union between the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed and Ali, were believed to possess power of healing. It is in this context that Bruzzi, discusses the role of religion (in this case Islam and the Khatmiyya brotherhood).

Not only are the leaders of the Khatmiyya Brotherhood endowed with the power of healing, this power was transmitted across generations as well. One of the most colourful personalities of colonial Eritrea was Shariffa Alawiyya, the surviving daughter of Sidi Hashim el- Mirgani. Making full use of the healing powers bestowed on her due to her genealogy, the Shariffa Alawiyya emerged as one of the most important personalities in western Eritrea, between 1920 and 1940, until she finally handed her powers to a male heir.

The thrust of Bruzzi's paper is not so much on the role of Islam in promoting capitalism but rather on its function as a repository of knowledge (both theoretical and practical) on the needs of the body and soul of its adherents. It is a good piece that illustrates the role of women in Islamic communities as more dynamic and complex, as we can see both in colonial documents and in recent work dealing with other African countries/colonies) [Chelati Dirar, U., 2003, 2006; Vaughan M. 1994].

Silvia Cristofori's essay investigates the relationship between capitalism and religion through an analysis of archival missionary sources. The purpose is to analyze the specific local dynamics of the encounter between European priests and the Rwandan society.

Cristofori's essay reconstructs a complex and highly dynamic scenario that changes according to the regional contexts. From this analysis the Rwandan territory appears as a chessboard where the central and local authorities interact with missionaries in a different way, trying to use the presence of White Fathers to their advantage.

So this article shows how, on the one hand, the political and economic power of the missions was formed within the complex relation between local and central Rwandan authorities. On the other hand, in the early years of their presence within the Rwandan territory, the White Fathers contributed to re-defining this relationship in a manner that was more incisive than the one of colonial German administration.

Cristofori's text gives the reader a peculiar portrait of the missions: in certain ways, the White Fathers were similar to the courts of local powerful "lords". The mission effectively represented a potential ally against the central authority. However, within the balances of regional powers, the mission was a competing authority which re-defined patronage networks.

It is in relation to these primarily political and economic relationships that the missionary chronicles cite the social categories of the Tutsi and the Hutu. For the Fathers, these two stereotyped typologies represented, on the one hand, the minority but dominating group of leaders with close ties to the court and, on the other hand, the rural majority that was under domination. The misrepresented perspective of the White Fathers was influenced by a European racial vision of differences and inequalities within the African continent.

Hence in the Cristofori's pages the mission appears as a laboratory for the radical transformation which began to be implemented two decades later under the Belgian domination. European missions initiated the transformation of the Rwandan society long before the racist policies of the Belgian colonial administration. See particularly the references to unpublished material and religious archives, in the period 1903-1910 [Sources from the archive of the General Curia of the Society of Missionaries of Africa, headquarters in Rome].

All the papers published in this dossier have some innovative ideas and reproduce the vitality of the international debate on religion and social issues in Africa. They also reflect in a way the status of European research on African Studies. The interdisciplinary nature of the theme of the panel (religion and capitalism) requires an inter-disciplinary competence quite visible in some of the papers. Yet, the broad issues of religion and capitalism and of how these two are incorporated into the development discourse articulated by the main stakeholders have not been adequately reflected. It is perhaps inevitable that some issues (anthropology, economic history, political science) are more studied than issues that straddle over several disciplines as religion and development discourse. However, these works are extremely interesting, given the lack of interdisciplinary work done so far by Italian studies in the Central Africa and particularly in Horn of Africa. The new generation of scholars, even in Italy, seems now more connected to the international debate and related to many themes recently discussed in the most relevant journals in this area studies. A relevant change and a big achievement in the field.

The papers of this dossier can indeed be considered as pointers into issues of current affairs where the role of religion (any religion) is being compared with that of the role of money (and the spread of capitalism) as the only universal and binding ritual of communication. The transformation of African landscapes in reaction to the spread of money and the capitalist system that moves it could offer interesting insights into the struggles between the human needs of predictable/secure life and the demands of a capitalist system that is built on the logic of reinventing itself for the sake of it.

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