RELIGION, AGENCY AND HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT

A study of ZOA's engagement with religious actors in peacebuilding

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Summary

Although an academic appreciation of the role of religion in peacebuilding has developed recently, a self-evident application of 'religious peacebuilding' in humanitarian practice has been lacking. To understand this gap between theory and practice, this research looks at tendencies of 'structure' and 'agency' in the humanitarian field, through the informed decisions actors make. Focusing on the religious NGO ZOA, this thesis researches how engaging with religious actors in peacebuilding is experienced by staff and what these experiences tell about the agency religious NGOs exercise within the humanitarian field.

The research shows that ZOA does not deliberately cooperate with religious actors for their religiosity. However, in practice, cooperation with religious actors occurs often, because of their strategic added value. The informed decisions ZOA makes indicate that religious NGOs exercise agency within the humanitarian field. Simultaneously, however, this agency is limited on an ideological level, relating to conceptualizations of aid. Concretely, ZOA displays two 'blind spots', including the idea that responses to community problems need to be non-religious, and that only non-religious problems need to be responded to. However, these assumptions might not correspond to aid receivers' own perceptions. Consequently, the absence of self-evident application of 'religious peacebuilding' results from a lack of sensitivity to the fact that aid receivers might have religious needs and might desire religious responses to their problems. The research shows that not only secular, but also religious organizations lack this sensitivity. By solely providing secular responses, humanitarian actors might fundamentally misunderstand the people they try to serve.

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Introduction

In the past decades, secular approaches to humanitarianism have become default. Both in development and humanitarian work, aid givers typically refrain from religion, because it seems too sensitive, complex or even irrelevant. However, scholars are increasingly criticizing this secular framework of the humanitarian field and its underlying assumption that 'the secular' is a neutral category. They argue that secularism is not just the absence of religion, but a socially and historically constructed phenomenon with its own concepts, norms, and influence on the way people act and interact. Especially, it is argued that these secular approaches marginalize religious perspectives.[1]

The predominance of secularism in the humanitarian field is amongst others translated in the fact that many NGOs do not self-evidently interact with religious actors. Religious NGOs rarely deliberately motivate staff to include religion in their activities, despite their own religious background or the religious background of their beneficiaries. An example of this phenomenon can be found at the Christian NGO ZOA.

ZOA is a Dutch, religious NGO, operating worldwide in contexts of armed conflict and natural disasters to assist in relief and recovery. The organization was founded in 1973 in response to a humanitarian crisis in South East Asia. Since then, it has developed into a professional NGO that employs almost a thousand people and currently works in 14 countries across Africa, the Middle East, South East Asia and South America.[2] Inspired by Christian faith, ZOA wants to support people who suffer, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, religion or gender.[3]

As one of its activities, ZOA engages in peacebuilding. Through its interventions, ZOA wants to enable people to experience sustainable peace, justice, mutual trust, personal dignity and confidence.[4] The organization values its Christian identity. It is articulated in policy documents, in

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[1] See amongst others: A. Ager and J. Ager, *Faith, Secularism, and Humanitarian Engagement: Finding the Place of Religion in the Support of Displaced Communities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015); José Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," in *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (2009): 1049-1066, accessed April 5, 2021, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40972201; O.J. Wilkinson, *Secular and Religious Dynamics in Humanitarian Response* (London: Routledge, 2020).
[2] During this research in 2021, ZOA has phased out in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.
[3] ZOA, "ZOA Strategic Plan 2019-2022: Every Life Matters," ZOA (2019): 7, accessed July 7, 2021, https://www.zoa-international.com/content/uploads/ZOA-strategic-plan-2019-2022-ABRIDGED.pdf.
[4] ZOA, "ZOA Policy on Peacebuilding," ZOA (April 2017): 4, accessed April 27, 2021, https://www.zoa.nl/content/uploads/14042017-Peacebuilding-policy-final-and-approved.pdf.

which faith operates as an inspiring source for projects. Simultaneously, its Christian identity is embodied in practice, amongst others in the form of a weekly devotion for all staff at the Dutch headquarters to open the week and the decision to only hire staff for these Dutch headquarters that actively practice their faith.

Whereas this Christian identity is omnipresent within the organization, religion is not clearly visible in its humanitarian activities. Staff members emphasize that they are not engaged in proselytizing activities, but solely aim to assist people that are in need. ZOA's peacebuilding policy includes ideas about sensitive issues, like gender and conflict sensitivity.[5] However, the organization does not have formal policies on how to deal with religion and does not actively encourage or prohibit its staff to engage with religion in projects.

This neglect of religion in the organization's policy and practice is interesting in the first place, because religion is playing a significant role in many conflicts today. Moreover, religion shapes the lives of the majority of the world population, and therefore many of ZOA's beneficiaries. With regard to peacebuilding, the question of religion is even more relevant, because a recognition has developed among scholars that religion can contribute to sustainable peace. Catalyzed by Scott Appleby, an increasing body of literature has acknowledged that people cannot only mobilize religion to use violence, but to pursue peace as well. Through religious leaders, networks and personal faith experiences, religion can uniquely change people's attitudes towards conflicts and motivate them to peace.[6]

Generally, the relevance of religion in the humanitarian field is increasingly acknowledged in academia, whereas secular approaches have been problematized. Nevertheless, as visible in the case of ZOA, we still see that engagement with religious actors or ideas is not happening naturally in practice. If including religious perspectives in peacebuilding indeed has positive effects, it is

[5] With regard to 'gender', ZOA recognizes the important role of women in peacebuilding. Therefore, each project is at least gender sensitive, but strives to be gender transformative. With regard to 'conflict sensitivity', ZOA tries to be aware of the context in which it intervenes, but also on the impact of its own presence on this context. Concretely, it means that ZOA at minimum aims to 'Do no harm', but tries at maximum to 'Do some good'. See: ZOA, "ZOA Policy on Peacebuilding," 5, 14; Corita Corbijn, Hesta Groenewald, and Heloise Heyer, "Living conflict sensitivity: How ZOA changed to better work in conflict, a best practice paper," ZOA (2020), accessed April 27, 2021, https://www.zoa-international.com/best-practice-paper-living-conflict-sensitivity-how-zoa-changed-to-better-work-in-conflict/.

[6] See amongst others: David R. Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002); Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

remarkable that it is not happening on a large scale in practice. Therefore, there might be reasons why organizations do not engage with religious actors, which we do not know at this moment.

Current academic approaches researching ‘religious peacebuilding’ and the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ in the humanitarian field, have mainly looked at the way that religion could positively influence development outcomes. However, this approach is rather instrumental. It does not acknowledge religious actors’ autonomy to make their own decisions, but approaches them as exceptions to the secular norm. Consequently, we have not been able to grasp how these religious actors interact with other actors, and exercise a certain agency on the humanitarian field. Nevertheless, when we gain more insights in their perspectives, we might better understand why engaging with religion in peacebuilding has not become a regular practice at this moment. Therefore, this thesis will look at the phenomenon of religious peacebuilding through the lens of tendencies of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’. It will look at the informed decisions that actors make in the humanitarian field, by focusing on the ideas and experiences of a specific religious actor.

Concretely, this research focuses on the experiences of ZOA and its decisions to engage with religious and secular actors in peacebuilding. ZOA is an experienced NGO that works in multiple country contexts, which makes its experiences relevant to research. Specifically, this thesis wants to research how engaging with religious actors in peacebuilding is experienced by ZOA staff and what these experiences tell us about the agency religious NGOs exercise within the humanitarian field.

Instead of researching the experiences and agency of ‘religious actors’ in general, this thesis focus on a religious NGO, to prevent generalizations within the heterogeneous category of ‘religious actors’. Within this category, experiences and levels of agency might namely highly vary. By shifting the focus from religion’s effects on humanitarian outcomes, to the experiences of interaction between actors to do these activities in the first place, this thesis aims to contribute to academic debates on ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ in the humanitarian field.

To research these experiences, I will both make an inventory of recent ZOA peacebuilding projects and interview ZOA staff. For both, several measures are taken based on ethical considerations to prevent unintended harm.[7] These two research methods enable me to map trends

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[7] This thesis deals with past and current peacebuilding projects in post-conflict situations. Since those situations are fragile, presenting confidential information might be harmful to these peacebuilding processes, to research participants and to ZOA. Therefore, the following measures are taken to ensure that I minimize the harm my research could

in ZOA's peacebuilding, investigate the extent to which ZOA cooperates with religious actors, and find out staff's experiences and ideas on engaging with religious actors in peacebuilding. Although this will be further elaborated in the first chapter, I define an actor as 'religious' in my research when it presents and understands itself as religious. More information on the methods will be shared in chapters III and IV.

Before moving on, I want to emphasize that I am aware that a rough distinction between 'secular' and 'religious' is problematic. This binary opposition does not correspond to reality, but these categories are actually more fluid. Therefore, it might be difficult to distinguish between religious and secular projects. Moreover, people might not consciously perceive their approaches as religious or secular. However, for the aim of clarity, I distinguish here between secular and religious approaches and will bring more nuance throughout the research when I think it is desirable.

In addition, by looking at the role of religion in peacebuilding, it could still appear as if 'the secular' is privileged, because 'the religious' needs to be researched and 'the secular' would thus be default. Moreover, by shifting attention towards religious actors, it could be assumed that including religion would solve all problems. I want to stress that I do not aim to argue either of these assumptions. On the contrary, I believe that both religious and secular approaches are neither neutral nor natural. Rather than arguing that one of the two would be better, this thesis wants to critically examine what these approaches mean for aid givers in the first place and how they experience such approaches.

Lastly, my thesis will be composed as follows. The first chapter consists of a literature review to critically analyze the status quo of academic research on religious peacebuilding and 'the religious' and 'the secular' in the humanitarian field. In the second chapter, I will elaborate on the concepts of 'structure' and 'agency' to explain my theoretical framework. Chapter III presents the case of ZOA and elaborates on the degree of religious involvement in ZOA's peacebuilding activities, based on the inventory. The fourth chapter discusses ZOA staff's experiences and ideas on cooperation in general, religious actors in particular, and ZOA's Christian identity, based on the interviews. Chapter V will then reflect on the meaning of the results by looking at what the case of

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unintendedly bring. All information I receive from ZOA is treated with confidentiality and sensitivity. This means that both data of the inventory and the interviews is anonymized, and names of specific individuals or organizations are not used in this research. Furthermore, interviews have been based on informed consent to enable research participants to consciously decide whether they want to cooperate. Recordings of interviews are deleted immediately after this research project.

ZOA tells us about the ‘agency’ of religious NGOs in the humanitarian field. The thesis will end with a conclusion, in which I sum up my findings and give some recommendations for further research.

Chapter I *Literature review*

The religious and the secular in the humanitarian field

Throughout history, religion, development and humanitarianism have been related. Although humanitarianism and development are different forms of aid, relating respectively to more short-term support in response to disasters and longer-term support to achieve sustainable change, I will use both terms interchangeably. Our main interest here lies namely in the way that religion is operating in these fields, not in the kind of support provided. When looking at the role of religion, we can see that humanitarian values have been linked to religious faith in varying contexts, and religious groups have been engaged in the provision of support, dating back to colonial times with the activities of missionaries and the idea of a 'civilizing mission'.[8]

However, in the twentieth century, a discomfort with religion developed in the humanitarian sector. Already since the Enlightenment period in Europe, a narrative was created that religion would not fit in the project of modernity. Religion was increasingly related to emotion and placed in opposition to reason in Western thinking. Therefore, it had to move to the private sphere, and its public position had to be replaced by reason to guide all societies to modernity. Because religion was associated with the religious wars in the 16th and 17th century, it was increasingly disconnected from politics after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. With a decreasing power of the church and rising power of the modern state, it was believed that modern societies would all become increasingly secular. According to this 'secularization thesis', religion would eventually cease to influence public life or global affairs.[9] These ideas resulted in a near displacement of religious

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[8] Elizabeth Ferris, "Faith-based and Secular Organizations," in *International Review of the Red Cross* 87, no. 858 (2005): 316-317, accessed December 9, 2020, DOI: 10.1017/S1816383100181366; Jörg Haustein, "Development as a form of religious engineering? Religion and secularity in development discourse," in *Religion* 51, no. 1 (July 2020): 19-39, accessed January 19, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/0048721X.2020.1792049; Peter Walker et al., "The Role of Spirituality in Humanitarian Crisis Survival and Recovery," in *Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism,* edited by Michael Barnett and Janice Stein, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 124.

[9] For a comprehensive account on the role of religion and secularity in the West in premodern and modern times, see: Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), especially Chapters 9 and 10.

discourses and practices in the humanitarian field in the 20th century, because a strict secularization was perceived to serve neutrality and respect international human rights.[10]

Nevertheless, a continuing or even resurgent influence of religion challenged the plausibility of the secularization thesis. It became increasingly clear that religion continued to influence public affairs, amongst others in the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine, and the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001.[11] Due to the large religious diversity in the world and religion's ongoing presence in many people's lives, Europeans became increasingly aware of the exceptionality of their own secularity.

These factors stimulated a renewed interest in religion since the 2000s, amongst others in the role of religion and faith-based actors in development theory, policy and practice.[12] Scholars started to unpack this category of 'the secular' and to criticize the assumption that it is neutral, fixed, and natural. Wilkinson has argued that 'the secular' is not just the mere absence of religion, but a socially and historically constructed phenomenon with ensuing concepts, norms, and influence on the way people act.[13] Up on that, Ager and Ager have argued that secularism marginalizes religious perspectives, practices and experiences. Whereas it claims to be ideologically 'neutral', it privileges liberal materialist assumptions, like a conviction that reason should universally determine truth.[14]

It might be helpful to shortly reflect on what 'the secular' entails. Based on the abovementioned contributions, we can conceptualize 'the secular' as a social construct, which consists of a set of ideas, rules and norms on the one hand, and implicates varying practices and behavior on the other hand. Casanova has argued that "the secular has become a central modern

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[10] A. Ager and J. Ager, *Faith, Secularism, and Humanitarian Engagement: Finding the Place of Religion in the Support of Displaced Communities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015), 1-31; Sadia Kidwai, "The Limits of Hospitality: Finding Space for Faith," in *The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question*, edited by Luca Mavelli and Erin Wilson, 176 (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016).
[11] Armstrong, *Fields of Blood,* 302-366.
[12] G. Clarke, "Faith Matters: Faith-Based Organizations, Civil Society and International Development," in *Journal of International Development* 18 (August 2006): 835, accessed December 9, 2020, DOI: 10.1002/jid.1317; G. Clarke and M. Jennings, *Development, Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1-2; J. Lunn, "The Role of Religion, Spirituality and Faith in Development: A Critical Theory Approach," in *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 5 (2009): 937, accessed December 9, 2020, DOI: 10.1080/01436590902959180; M. Schmid, *Religion, Conflict, and Peacemaking : An Interdisciplinary Conversation* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018), 1-2; Christine Schliesser, S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana, and Pauline Kollontai, *On the Significance of Religion in Conflict and Conflict Resolution* (London: Routledge, 2020), 9-11.
[13] O.J. Wilkinson, *Secular and Religious Dynamics in Humanitarian Response* (London: Routledge, 2020), 1-26.
[14] A. Ager and J. Ager, "Faith and the Discourse of Secular Humanitarianism," in *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 3 (September 2011): 457–459, accessed July 11, 2021, DOI: 10.1093/jrs/fer030.

category […] to construct, codify, grasp, and experience a realm or reality differentiated from "the religious"'.[15] Charles Taylor has argued that the distinctive feature which makes our times into a 'secular age' is a shift from a form of society in which religion was present in all levels of society and social practices, to a form of society in which religion is just one option among others. This change relates to the public sphere, in which religion does not fulfill a guiding role anymore for our norms, principles, and decisions, but also to a decline in religious belief and practice more generally. However, more deeply, it is a change from a position in which belief in God was unproblematic, to a situation in which this exact same belief needs justification.[16]

Secularity thus not only narrowly refers to a separation between church and state, but more broadly as well to morality, discourse and behavior. Ager and Ager argue that beyond providing a legal and political framework in which pluralism can function, secularism has become a functional framework which influences discourses in different contexts and thereby prescribes certain forms of behavior and ideas.[17] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd applies this to international relations theory, and argues that the uncritical acceptance of secularism as a discourse in this field has normative consequences. She argues that the secularist division between religion and politics is constructed rather than fixed. Secularism identifies something called 'religion' and posits it as a separate entity from domains like the state, economy and science. For Shakman Hurd, secularism is a popular, authoritative narrative that is widely perceived as legitimate and given. It has become a language in which moral and political questions are defined, contested, settled and legitimated.[18]

Rather than critiquing 'the secular' as a category, scholars have thus mainly problematized the assumption that 'the secular' is a global, neutral, and objective truth. In relation to this, Burchardt, Wohlrab-Sahr and Middell have criticized theories that portray Western secularity as universally applicable. Instead, they argue that multiple conceptualizations of distinctions between religious and non-religious spheres exist around the world, with varying goals and as a result of different processes of social change. In their contribution, they shift our focus from Western conceptualizations to non-Western secularities.[19] In relation to this argument, José Casanova

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[15] José Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," in *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (2009): 1049, accessed April 5, 2021, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40972201.
[16] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age,* Gifford Lectures (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[17] Ager and Ager, "Faith and the Discourse of Secular Humanitarianism," 457-459.
[18] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
[19] Marian Burchardt, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, and Matthias Middell, *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

problematized the European tendency to experience its own secularization as a natural consequence of modernization. He argues that this carries normative consequences. Namely, when 'to be secular' is perceived as 'to be modern, autonomous and free', it is implicated that 'to be religious' means 'to be somehow unfree, autonomous and not yet fully modern'. Consequently, secularity is not just the absence of religious belief, but a perceived superior condition which is uncritically accepted as a natural outcome of being modern. Nevertheless, these secular ideologies do not correspond to experiences of the majority of the world population, which is still religious.[20]

Especially for the humanitarian field, the assumption of secular neutrality is problematic, because personal faith is of critical importance for many people in times of crisis. Faith can be helpful in unique ways to deal with and interpret traumatic events, because it provides people with language and equipment to deal with finitude and give meaning to incomprehensible experiences.[21] For example, religion has proven to be a powerful coping mechanism for displaced people with positive effects on their psycho-social health.[22]

Henceforth, when religion is of such importance for people's lives and the way they understand their own experiences, a refusal to even address religion in humanitarian programs creates a situation in which aid givers fail to meet the most essential needs of beneficiaries. Thereby, secular approaches can alienate people, lead to misunderstandings and broken relationships, because aid givers and beneficiaries lack a fundamental understanding of the others' experiences. This can in turn result in inappropriate or even irrelevant assistance.[23]

Religion, violence and peacebuilding

Next to the abovementioned rise in recognition of religion's relevance for humanitarianism and development, a growing body of literature in the field of conflict studies has acknowledged the potential role of religion in peacebuilding. In this field, scholars initially tended to relate religion to violence. Mark Juergensmeyer has argued that religious terrorism is characterized by a tendency

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[20] Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," 1052-1057.
[21] Walker et al., "The Role of Spirituality in Humanitarian Crisis Survival and Recovery," 119-124.
[22] H. Straut Eppsteiner and J. Hagan, "Religion as Psychological, Spiritual and Social Support in the Migration Undertaking," in *Intersections of Religion and Migration: Issues at the Global Crossroads,* edited by J.B. Saunders, E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and S. Snyder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 49-70.
[23] A. Ager and J. Ager, "Challenging the Discourse on Religion, Secularism and Displacement," in *The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question*, edited by Luca Mavelli and Erin Wilson, 37-52 (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016); Wilkinson, *Secular and Religious Dynamics in Humanitarian Response,* 3.

of perpetrators to frame and understand the violent act as part of a 'cosmic war' between the forces of good and evil, for which no compromise is possible and which transcends earthly issues. For these violent acts, religion provides a motivation, justification, organization and a world view.[24] In contrast, William Cavanaugh has problematized this connection between religion and violence, by arguing that scholars fail to adequately define what 'religion' entails, and how 'religious violence' contrasts with other forms of violence. Cavanaugh urges to abandon the religious-secular dichotomy, and transcultural and transhistorical definitions of religion. Instead, he encourages researchers to focus on the factors that make ideologies prone to violence in general.[25]

While much research thus tended to look at how religion is related to violence, an increasing recognition developed how religion could be mobilized to pursue peace. Scott Appleby defined religion as "the human response to a reality perceived as sacred" and argued that this experience can create varying responses, including both violence and peace.[26] Thereby, Scott Appleby is sensitive to the internal plurality in religious traditions, and moves beyond reductive definitions of religion as a homogenous positive or negative force. Scott Appleby strongly focuses on the role of religious leaders, and the condition under which they mobilize their followers to either violence or peace.[27]

Furthermore, Marc Gopin has taken up a hermeneutic approach and argued that increasing our knowledge of religious traditions could help to develop a language to communicate with religiously violent people. It could help to offer creative alternatives for attitudes towards the conflict, based on the religious traditions themselves. Moreover, he argues that certain shared values among religions relating to peace, like forgiveness and reconciliation, could create a common ground for interreligious conflict resolution.[28] In addition, David Smock has emphasized

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[24] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, third edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).
[25] William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[26] R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 8.
[27] R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
[28] Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

the importance of interfaith dialogue, explaining how it contributes to mutual understanding and trust, and a common idea of how to solve the conflict.[29]

Katrien Hertog focused in turn on the ways in which religion can influence individuals through spirituality. She argues that spirituality has a transformative impact on people and has the capacity to address the depths of human existence, their inner lives, minds and hearts. Therefore, it can shape people's behavior in a unique way and create an authentic, consistent, proactive, and nonviolent stance towards peacebuilding.[30]

In sum, through these contributions, an awareness rose in the field of conflict studies that religion in varying and complex ways operates in both conflict and peace and can motivate people to both. Nevertheless, it might remain unclear what we exactly mean by the term 'religion'. Therefore, without aiming to provide a clear-cut definition of 'religion', it might be helpful to shortly reflect on the meaning of 'religion' in this thesis.

The category of 'religion'

'Religion' is a massive concept, meaning many things to many people. In attempts to define religion, people have both tried to describe what religion *is,* so-called 'substantial' definitions, and what religion *does,* so-called 'functional' definitions. Substantial definitions focus on religion's content or substance, on the beliefs and practices it contains. Functional definitions, in turn, look at how these ideologies and practices function in people's lives.[31] In contrast, Cavanaugh argues that religion is a constructed category rather than an essentialist descriptor of a certain reality we can perceive. Therefore, a transcultural or transhistorical concept of what religion is or does cannot exist. Instead, scholars should be interested in the ways that the category of religion has been constructed in different times and places.[32] In addition to this, Talal Asad has taken up an anthropological approach, arguing that religions consist of several elements and relationships which are historically specific. Religious symbols do not only consist of beliefs, but also of

[29] David R. Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002).
[30] K. Hertog, *The Complex Reality of Religious Peacebuilding: Conceptual Contributions and Critical Analysis* (Lexington Books, 2010).
[31] Emma Tomalin, *The Routledge Handbook of Religions and Global Development* (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2015), 40.
[32] Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 58.

translations of this belief in discourses, experiences in social life, and power relations, which are all historically specific. Because of this mix of influences, definitions of religion are itself the historical product of a discursive process. Therefore, a universal definition of religion does not exist.[33]

Whether the concept of religion is solely a historically specific, invented construct or a description of a real, existing category we can study, we cannot deny how religion is influencing people's lives. Beyond all things, religion can be seen as a multilayered, complex phenomenon, that in a wide variety of ways influences human existence and behavior. Owen Frazer and Mark Owen have identified five ways in which religion plays a role in conflict and peacebuilding, which are further elaborated in other contributions.[34] In my opinion, these five forms can be translated more broadly to ways in which religion operates in human and social life. These are the forms they distinguish:

1) *Religion as a set of ideas*: "a shared set of teachings, doctrines, norms, values, stories, and narratives that provides a framework for understanding and acting in the world."[35] In this form, religion can be understood as a discourse, which refers to the specific language that is used to communicate, but also more broadly to a manifestation of a particular worldview that is constructed based on the power relations in a context.[36]
2) *Religion as a community*: "a defined group of followers and believers that provides individuals with a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves." This form points to the integrative dimension of religion, the way it contributes to collective and personal identities, which can contribute both to social cohesion and exclusion .

[33] Talal Asad, "Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27-54.
[34] Owen Frazer and Mark Owen, *Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding: Analysis Guide* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2018), 10-15, accessed via jliflc.com on April 2, 2021; Owen Frazer and Richard Friedli, *Approaching Religion in Conflict Transformation: Concepts, Cases and Practical Implications*, Center for Security Studies (Zurich: ETH Zurich, 2015), 7-10, accessed via jliflc.com at April 2, 2021; Schliesser, Kadayifci-Orellana, and Kollontai, *On the Significance of Religion in Conflict and Conflict Resolution*, 28-36.
[35] For all quotes between quotation marks in this list, which explain the 5 forms of religion, I want to refer to Frazer and Mark Owen, *Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding*, 8.
[36] In an earlier contribution, Owen and Friedli separate *religion as discourse* from *religion as a set of teachings* as a different category in which religion operates in conflict and conflict transformation. In the later contribution by Owen and Frazer used in this thesis, only the category *religion as a set of ideas* is used, in which these former two categories are merged. For more information on *religion as a discourse,* see: Frazer and Friedli, *Approaching Religion in Conflict Transformation,* 14-15.

3) *Religion as an institution*: "the formal structures, leaders, and organizations associated with religious communities." Each religion is organized in a different way, but these systems provide a framework in which actors operate, and services can be delivered, like worship and education.
4) *Religion as a set of symbols and practices*: "the many visible, lived manifestations of a religion, from buildings to dress to ceremonies and rituals." In this form, religion provides stability, structure and meaning through the activities people undertake in their everyday life and life events.
5) *Religion as spirituality*: "a personal experience that provides a sense of purpose and connectedness to something greater than oneself, as well as a powerful source of motivation." This category relates to personal, internalized experiences of faith, which influence the meaning people give to experiences and the general lifestyle they adopt.

This broad scope of dimensions shows us how religion functions in multiple and complementary social, personal, and psychological ways for both people and communities. In these forms, religion can operate both as divider and connector. As a connector, religion can have positive effects by connecting people, shaping identities, and enabling people to give meaning to and make sense of their lives. Simultaneously, exactly these same forms can function as a divider, resulting in othering, divisions, and tensions.[37] Thereby, religion is a complex and ambivalent factor that can motivate people to both violence and peace.

A gap between humanitarian theory and practice

Together, all abovementioned contributions have made us more aware of what 'the religious' and 'the secular' entail, how complex these concepts are and how they operate in the fields of development, humanitarianism, conflict and peacebuilding. Specifically, they have made us more aware of the fact that religion plays an often undervalued, but significant role in these issues. Simultaneously, they have made us more sensitive to the fact that predominant secular approaches to humanitarianism are neither neutral nor natural. Nevertheless, this recognition of religion's relevance in academic theory has not self-evidently translated in development practice. The case

[37] Frazer and Mark Owen, *Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding*, 9-10; Frazer and Friedli, *Approaching Religion in Conflict Transformation*, 28-30.

of ZOA shows this hesitance among humanitarian practitioners to create policy and practice on engagement with religion in aid provision.

Nora Khalaf-Elledge has tried to better understand this gap between religion's place in theory and practice by researching development practitioners' personal attitudes towards religion. Based on a qualitative study of government aid agencies, recipient organizations and local women's rights activist groups, she argues that many development practitioners hold negative personal attitudes and biases towards religion, which make them discard religion as 'too tricky' to engage with. Religion is perceived as backward, uncontrollable, impulsive, and unpredictable, whereas secular approaches are assumed to ensure neutrality and objectivity for development practices.[38] Whereas underlying assumptions of secularity's neutrality thus have lost their power in academic theory, Khalaf-Elledge's research shows that these assumptions are still omnipresent among practitioners.

In addition, Tara R. Gingerich et al. argue that current trends to work with local humanitarian actors have not resulted in systemic engagement with local faith actors, because of a lack of religious literacy among humanitarian practitioners. They define religious literacy as "an understanding of the role of religion and religious actors in a given community". This includes a basic understanding of dominant and marginalized religious worldviews, of interaction between these worldviews, of the influence of society, culture and history on these worldviews, and an ability to explore the religious dimensions within a particular context. Because of this lack of understanding, humanitarian organizations fail to effectively navigate their engagement with local faith actors.[39]

These insights are helpful to better understand the gap between development theory and practice, because they make us more aware that the degree to which religious perspectives are integrated in development practice is not dependent solely on *the potential effectiveness of religious perspectives*, but as well on *the willingness and competence of actors in the field to engage with religious perspectives*. This latter approach is often missing in research, but significantly contributes to correcting an instrumental bias focusing on religion's effectivity.

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[38] Nora Khalaf-Elledge, ""It's a tricky one" – development practitioners' attitudes towards religion," in *Development in Practice* 30, no. 5 (2020): 660-671, accessed April 2, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/09614524.2020.1760210.
[39] Tara R. Gingerich et al., "Local Humanitarian Leadership and Religious Literacy: Engaging with Religion, Faith, and Faith Actors," *Oxfam International* and *Harvard Divinity School* (March 2017): 1-44, accessed September 1, 2021, Oxfam Online Library, DOI: 10.21201/2017.9422.

Jones and Petersen already critically addressed this instrumental bias in the field of 'religion and development' a decade ago. They explain how most of the field's literature has focused on the effects religion might have for development outcomes, rather than being interested in the phenomenon of religion in development as such. They argue that this instrumental bias results from the fact that an interest in the role of religion in development mostly originated from development practitioners and donors rather than academic scholars. Therefore, research has strongly been informed by practical concerns, which resulted in a focus on exploring whether or not religion makes a difference to the effectiveness of implementation of development activities.[40]

This instrumentalized focus can be seen amongst others in debates on the role of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in the humanitarian field. Besides arguing what the category of FBOs entails in the first place, scholars have mainly looked at their advantages and disadvantages for development outcomes and beneficiaries. Some have emphasized FBOs' higher level of trust and authority in the communities they work in, their ability to access remote areas through religious networks, and their unique capability of giving spiritual and communal support to people to cope with crises. However, critiques have pointed towards FBOs' risk of proselytizing, their lack of technical capacity and the influence religious actors might have on social norms and conflict dynamics.[41] These arguments show that scholars' primary interest has been to research what the effect of including or excluding FBOs might be for the humanitarian outcomes.

Although this instrumentalized approach has indeed increased our understanding of the effects of religion, it has not enabled us to fully understand why religion is or is not engaged with in practice. This can be explained by the fact that debates on the role of religion in development have tended to frame these religious perspectives as isolated and static categories within the broader, secular field they are part of. Consequently, scholars have failed to adequately conceptualize that the humanitarian field is a place in which varying actors and perspectives meet, interact and respond to each other.

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[40] Ben Jones and Marie Juul Petersen, "Instrumental, Narrow, Normative? Reviewing recent work on religion and development," in *Third World Quarterly* 32, no 7 (2011): 1291-1306, accessed April 2, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2011.596747.

[41] Wilkinson, *Secular and Religious Dynamics in Humanitarian Response,* 2; Jones and Petersen, "Instrumental, Narrow, Normative?" 1296; Elco van Burg, "Faith and development: The role of local religious organization in community change in Papua," in *E3S Web of Conferences* no. 202 (November 2020), 1-10, accessed September 17, 2021, DOI: 10.1051/e3sconf/202020201001.

Conceptualizing the humanitarian field as a *dynamic* place in which secular and religious actors meet, enables us to see that these actors neither stand on their own nor operate in a vacuum. Rather, actors relate to each other and make conscious decisions on whether to engage with each other. By ignoring the fact that religious and secular actors make these conscious decisions, we fail to see how they shape both the humanitarian field and humanitarian activities. If we lack a sensitivity to these dynamics, we cannot understand why religious approaches to development, humanitarianism and peacebuilding are included on the ground or not.

Towards bridging the gap

By focusing on practitioners' attitudes and religious literacy, an important step to understand the gap between development theory and practice has been taken. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this still does not fully solve the academic knowledge gap. The degree to which religious perspectives are operating on the ground does namely not only depend on *the attitudes and competence of other actors towards religion*, but also on *the decisions that religious actors make themselves*. Approaching religious perspectives as something which people may decide to engage with, does not render justice to reality. It conceptualizes religious perspectives as passive, isolated and exceptional options among a wider range of possibilities, which can only be included when other actors in the field decide so.

However, religious actors are not at all passive, static or isolated groups that solely behave according to the wishes of other actors. Instead, they have their own ideas, make their own decisions and respond to the reality they are part of. Consequently, they are as much a relevant force that shapes the humanitarian field as secular actors. Henceforth, to better understand why religion is not included in development practice as much as theory would recommend, we do not only need to know what other development practitioners think of the category of religion or how effective religion's influence is for attaining development outcomes. Up on that, we need to know *how such religious actors experience their own role within the humanitarian field* and what might create a hesitance to interact with other religious and secular humanitarian actors.

There has already been some research that has tried to better understand the way various religious actors could relate to each other within the humanitarian field. Carlo Benedetti has researched whether cooperation between Islamic and Christian FBOs is happening or possible, arguing that it is mainly possible on field level rather than intellectual level between moderate

typologies of these FBOs.[42] Although this research indeed elaborates on the interaction between religious perspectives, it has only researched the interaction between FBOs and not how a broader variety of religious actors relates to each other. Moreover, it has still focused on the positive effects such forms of cooperation might bring, rather than researching why these FBOs might decide to interact with each other in the first place.

Nevertheless, I argue that it is important to research these interactions between religious and secular actors in the humanitarian field from the perspective of a religious actor. Namely, if we gain a better understanding of why religious actors may decide to engage with other religious and secular actors, we can better understand the way religious actors experience and perceive themselves within the humanitarian field. This might in turn help us to explain the gap of religion's role between humanitarian theory and practice. However, before explaining how this thesis exactly wants to contribute to these problems, it might be good to shortly reflect on the category of 'religious actors'.

Unpacking the category of 'religious actors'

The category of 'religious actors' is a rather broad category which is difficult to define. A religious actor's identity, image and power position does not only depend on its 'being religious'. Instead, these depend as well on intersections with other categories, for instance the specific religion it represents or the geographical space it operates from. Henceforth, it would be false to conceptualize the category of religious actors as homogenous. Rather, it is a diverse group, which actors might not even identify with or which lacks a feeling of interconnectedness. Moreover, it is highly problematic to conceptualize what aspects make an actor 'religious'. As an example, a local, Nigerian NGO that does not present itself as religious, but consists in practice of solely religious staff, might in fact be 'more' religious than an American FBO that is religiously inspired and presents itself as religious, but hires mostly secular people. In other words, defining the category of 'religious actors' is a complicated task.

Nevertheless, a factor that connects this heterogeneous group is the fact that actors consciously include their religion in their humanitarian activities in some way. Whether they are

[42] C. Benedetti, "Islamic and Christian Inspired Relief NGOs: Between Tactical Collaboration and Strategic Diffidence?" in *Journal of International Development* 18 (August 2006): 849–859, accessed December 9, 2020, DOI: 10.1002/jid.1318.

religiously inspired, hire religious staff, or pray before and after their humanitarian activities is another point of discussion. Those are namely factors that relate to the *degree of religious involvement,* which scholars often conceptualize as actors' 'religiosity'.[43] However, I do not aim to decide a minimum level of religiosity to classify an actor as 'religious'. Therefore, I take up a broad definition of the category of religious actors as *a heterogeneous group of actors, which in one way or another actively and deliberately include religion in their humanitarian work and present themselves as religious*. Within this broad category, I distinguish three groups, namely religious institutions, organizations, and leaders. Religious institutions can refer to churches or mosques, whereas religious organizations relate more to NGOs or other organizations with a religious background. The decision to only include religious leaders in this definition and not 'ordinary' religious individuals relates to the fact that religious individuals generally do not present themselves as religious in their humanitarian work, whereas religious leaders do. Naturally, this does not suppose that individuals cannot mobilize religion in peacebuilding. However, the fact that they do not explicitly present themselves as religious or mobilize religion deliberately in peacebuilding, makes that they do not fully meet the definition of 'religious actors'.

The heterogeneity of the category of 'religious actors' may result in strong differences in the way religious actors experience their own role within the humanitarian field. To render justice to these different experiences, this thesis focuses on the experiences of a specific kind of religious actor, namely a religious NGO. Although this reduces the applicability of my findings, it prevents generalizations of the experiences of the broad category of 'religious actors'.

Further, I define 'religious peacebuilding' in this thesis as *activities and processes in which religious actors and/or ideas are explicitly and consciously included to pursue peace.* Although both religious actors and ideas are relevant for religious peacebuilding, this thesis wants to focus on the interaction with religious actors in peacebuilding. This does not exclude the fact that actors may mobilize religious ideas for peacebuilding, like 'reconciliation' or 'forgiveness'. Although the application of religious ideas will be discussed as well, the main focus will be on ZOA's cooperation with religious actors and other actors in the humanitarian field.

[43] Tomalin, *The Routledge Handbook of Religions and Global Development*, 42.

ZOA, religious peacebuilding and agency

In sum, I have argued that there is a gap between the degree to which religion's role in peacebuilding is acknowledged in academic theory on the one hand, and the degree to which religious perspectives are included in practice on the other hand. Moreover, I have argued that we lack a full understanding of why this gap exists, because of a failure to conceptualize the humanitarian field as a dynamic, interactive space in which different secular and religious perspectives meet and make decisions on these interactions. Lastly, I have emphasized that to better understand the existence of this gap, we need to move away from picturing religious actors as passive categories and instead have to conceptualize them as active agents that make their own decisions and shape the humanitarian field they are part of.

To increase our insights in the way religious actors influence and shape the humanitarian field, this thesis wants to look at the experiences of the religious NGO ZOA. It wants to research how and why ZOA has decided to engage with other religious and secular actors in peacebuilding. Rather than researching how cooperation with religious actors might affect ZOA's broader aims, it wants to find out why ZOA staff decides to cooperate with religious actors or not in the first place, to gain a better understanding of how such decisions are made. In sum, this thesis wants to answer the question how religious peacebuilding is experienced by ZOA staff and what these experiences tell about the agency religious NGOs exercise within the humanitarian field.

By allowing more space in academia to the way religious actors make their own decisions and understand themselves within the humanitarian field, we might better understand why religion is not self-evidently adopted on a large scale in practice. Moreover, I believe that moving away from approaching religion as a passive category, but looking at it as an active actor, we might better understand the ways that 'the religious' and 'the secular' relate to each other in the humanitarian field. By explicitly researching these experiences of a religious actor, I hope to make us more sensitive to the ways in which secular and religious actors shape the humanitarian field they are part of. To better understand how religious actors make conscious decisions and the extent to which they are able to act on those, this research will look to the phenomenon of religious peacebuilding by framing it as the result of a dynamic interplay between 'structure' and 'agency'. In the next chapter, I will further reflect on these concepts.

Chapter II ‘*Agency’ and religious peacebuilding*

The first chapter has argued that religious actors are part of a dynamic humanitarian field, in which they are able to make conscious decisions that influence their actions. Put in another way, actors exercise a certain degree of ‘agency’ in the humanitarian field, which shapes the activities they employ. This chapter reflects on the concept of ‘agency’ and its relation to religious peacebuilding. It does not aim to extensively defend a position in the debate on the relationship between ‘structure’ and ‘agency’. Instead, it will explain how looking at ‘religious peacebuilding’ through a lens of tendencies between ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ helps us to better understand the extent to which we see engagement with religion in peacebuilding happening on the ground. First, I reflect on the concept of ‘agency’ more generally. Thereafter, I elaborate on Anthony Giddens’ ‘structuration theory’, and lastly, I explain how these ideas help us to better understand the phenomenon of ‘religious peacebuilding’.

The concept of ‘agency’

For centuries, scholars have tried to understand how actions of individual human beings relate to the broader context of activities and patterns in this world. In psychology and philosophy, this problem has mainly been studied on the individual level and resulted in debates on free will versus determinism. The question in these debates is whether and to which degree human beings have freedom to act or whether their actions are determined by other factors, like natural law. In philosophy, this question is related as well to questions of moral responsibility, the extent to which human beings can be held accountable for their actions.[44]

In sociology and history, debates have focused more on the implications of these dynamics to society at large and the course of history. This has resulted in debates on whether human beings have ‘agency’ or whether their actions are determined by larger social structures. Scholars that focus on this ‘structure’ side, emphasize the way that varying social factors can prevent individuals from fulfilling their full potential, like gender, ethnicity or sexuality. These ‘structures’ can operate at individual level, but also more broadly influence groups at societal or ideological level. On the

[44] Joseph Keim Campbell, Michael O’Rourke, and David Shier, *Freedom and Determinism. Topics in Contemporary Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: A Bradford Book, 2004); Jack Martin, Jeff Sugarman, and Janice Thompson, *Psychology and the Question of Agency*, SUNY Series, Alternatives in Psychology (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).

other hand, scholars focusing on the 'agency' side of this dichotomy, emphasize the freedom and independence an actor has to act and make decisions. Moreover, middle positions are taken in, in which human beings are seen as serious social actors that play a role in shaping the course of events, but are simultaneously shaped and constrained by social circumstances.[45] An influential view on the relation between 'structure' and 'agency' is taken up by Anthony Giddens in his 'structuration theory'.

Structuration theory

Anthony Giddens has tried to solve the problem of 'structure' and 'agency' by focusing on the dynamic nature of the two. He argues that sociological approaches have overemphasized the importance of a larger social whole over its individual parts. Instead, he argues that scholars should focus on social practices. Social practices are the enactment of everyday activities human beings engage in, which reproduce society. Giddens argues that these social practices are informed by rules, which he calls 'structure'. These rules are often not formal, but informal conventions that people tacitly know, which help to organize social practices. This makes social interaction highly complex, because people need to know these rules.[46]

However, structure does not only produce social practices. Simultaneously, social practices produce and reproduce structure. Giddens argues that social practices are 'recursive'. This means that actors decide on social practices, and these decisions are partly based on the structure they are part of, like the social conventions of a society. Simultaneously, by enacting a social practice, actors are reproducing the structure, and are able to change that structure as well. This is what Giddens calls the 'duality of structure'.[47]

Giddens thus strongly emphasizes that structure does not exist external to human beings or their social practices. Instead, structure is inherent to social practices, serving both as the medium

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[45] Donald M. MacRaild and Avram Tailor, "Social Structure and Human Agency in Historical Explanation," in *Social Theory and Social History* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 80-117; David F. Walsh, "Structure/Agency," in *Core sociological dichotomies*, edited by Chris Jenks (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 8-33.

[46] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 1-3; Kenneth Tucker, "Structuration Theory: Reconceptualizing Agency and Structure," in *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1998), 79-80; MacRaild and Tailor, *Social Theory and Social History,* 98-100.

[47] Philip Cassell, *The Giddens Reader* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 12-15; Tucker, "Structuration Theory," 84-85.

and the product of social practices. Giddens emphasizes as well that structure is both enabling and constraining. It enables people to engage in social practices, but it might constrain certain forms of behavior as well.[48]

The fact that people constantly produce and reproduce structure through their social practices results from the fact that people are reflexive and knowledgeable. Giddens argues that human beings make informed decisions, which are based on reflections on themselves and on other human beings. These informed decisions refer not that much to what actors want, but more to an ability to justify their actions. People engage in a continuous process of social learning, reflecting on practices and applying that knowledge. This makes them into purposive agents.[49]

Giddens distinguishes three levels of agency. First, agency relates to a discursive consciousness, a capacity to express conscious reasons for one's actions. Second, it refers to a practical consciousness, the unarticulated beliefs and knowledges that people use to orient themselves to situations and interpret the actions of other people. Lastly, agency relates to the unconscious, to that which cannot be easily put into words and resides beneath our conscious existence. For Giddens, the practical consciousness is the most important element of agency, the acts people engage in tacitly in their social life.[50]

Through his structuration theory, Giddens tries to understand why and how social life is structured. He thus explains that social life is the result of a dynamic interaction between 'structure' and 'agency'. The reproduction of society is thereby a result of the practical, creative activity of human beings. Besides that, Giddens explains why people decide to enact repetitively the same social practices. According to him, this has to do with ontological security. This means that people have the desire to feel 'at home' with oneself and the world. If people have that feeling of trust and comfort, their levels of anxiety are low or manageable. Therefore, engaging in predictable routines helps them to have a feeling of control, which enables them to make decisions. So, the building of trust and a certain predictability are necessary for actors to use their agency.[51] If people feel trust and safety, they are able to negotiate the routine interpersonal engagements they have. This desire for safety also explains the repetition of unpleasant things in our lives. Because of people's strong attachment to the familiar, they might be willing to continue unpleasant patterns, while better

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[48] Tucker, "Structuration Theory," 75-76, 84-85; MacRaild and Tailor, *Social Theory and Social History,* 98-100.
[49] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 3-5; Cassell, *The Giddens Reader,* 90; Tucker, "Structuration Theory," 75-76, 80-81.
[50] Tucker, "Structuration Theory," 80-81.
[51] Tucker, "Structuration Theory," 83-84.

alternatives are available as well. Social change then happens mainly when circumstances change and people respond to those changing circumstances.

In my view, Giddens' position on the problem of 'structure' and 'agency' renders most justice to the complex nature of reality. His theory namely enables us to see how our lives, societies and history at large is the product of a dynamic interplay between individual decisions, actions and events on the one hand, and broader structures and social factors which can shape such decisions and actions on the other hand. From this conceptualization, we can see that actors, exactly within these broader contexts that can shape their actions, are active agents with a certain amount of freedom or independence to make informed decisions and act on those. Thereby, we do not neglect the way that broader structures can constrain and shape actors' decisions. However, it makes us aware of the way that actors can influence the reality they are part of, and that their decisions and actions are not fully determined by circumstances or other actors. An actor has its own ideas and is, to a certain extent, able to make its own decisions, which shapes its behavior and activities.[52]

'Agency' and religious peacebuilding

These insights can be applied to the context of the humanitarian field and the role that religious actors take in this field. In the first chapter, I have argued that the humanitarian field is a dynamic place in which various actors meet and interact. Nevertheless, this conceptualization can be enriched when we frame these actors as groups that exercise a certain degree of agency on these interactions. Solely framing the humanitarian field as dynamic could namely still lead to a conceptualization in which certain actors are passive and can be engaged with at wish. However, when we attribute agency to all actors, including religious actors, we become more sensitive to the way each of them shapes the interactions they have. In other words, it prevents us from framing religious actors as passive and helps us to see them as active agents, generating a certain concrete output which we perceive, like peacebuilding activities. Approaching them as active agents, enables us to look at the conscious decisions they make and the interactions they undertake with other actors. This might in turn enable us to understand why 'religious peacebuilding' is not self-evidently happening in practice, while it is much appreciated in academic theory.

[52] MacRaild and Tailor, *Social Theory and Social History,* 152; Walsh, "Structure/Agency," 33.

Henceforth, using the concept of 'agency' as a tool in this research, enables us to see how both secular and religious actors influence the degree to which religious peacebuilding takes place. This perspective shifts our focus from the experiences of secular actors on religion towards an inclusion of religious actor's own experiences, ideas, decisions and actions. Thereby, we do not neglect the influence of the framework of the humanitarian field within which these decisions are made. However, it makes us aware that the concrete activities religious actors undertake are, at least partly, dependent on the conscious decisions actors make themselves.

In addition, the concept of 'agency' enables us to see differences in power positions between actors, because 'agency' is not equally distributed. The degree of agency an actor has is dependent on the degree of constraints it experiences from the structure, like poverty or discrimination. These social constraints vary among actors. Therefore, not all actors exercise an equal degree of agency.[53] When we apply this to the category of religious actors, we can see differences in power positions as well. As explained in the first chapter, the category of 'religious actors' is heterogeneous. This heterogeneity is also translated in religious actors' power positions.

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd has argued that discourses on religion tend to frame religion as having two faces, so-called 'good religion' versus 'bad religion'. These narratives emphasize that 'good' contributions from religion should be facilitated, like the way it supports peace, human rights and development. Simultaneously, the 'bad' aspects of religion should be minimized and disciplined, like the way it contributes to violence, chaos and intolerance.[54] Consequently, the place in which a religious actor is put on this binary distinction between 'good' and 'bad' religion, strongly influences its degree of agency. In other words, these narratives on 'good versus bad religion' and the intersections religious actors make with other categories like Christianity or Islam, can be seen as social factors that strongly determine these actors' agency in the humanitarian field. For example, a Christian INGO can probably exercise more agency than a local, Salafist imam in Sudan. As mentioned before, because of the large heterogeneity of this category, this thesis will focus on the perspective of a religious NGO, to prevent inadequate generalizations for the whole category of 'religious actors'.

In sum, the concept of 'agency' sensitizes us to the way that actors can make decisions and act on those decisions, which influences their concrete output that we perceive in practice. This

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[53] Walsh, "Structure/Agency," 33.

[54] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "Two Faces of Faith," in *Beyond Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 22-36.

perspective enriches our understanding of the dynamic nature of the humanitarian field, because it shifts our perception of religious actors as passive groups to active agents. An awareness of these dynamics in turn enables us to better understand why actors decide to mobilize religion in peacebuilding, and particularly why they decide to engage with religious actors. After these conceptual explanations, we will now investigate how these dynamics work out in the case the religious NGO ZOA.

Chapter III *Mapping ZOA's peacebuilding practices*

This chapter zooms in on the case of ZOA, and the interaction it has with other secular and religious actors in peacebuilding. First, the case of ZOA will be introduced, with a special focus on its peacebuilding projects. Thereafter, I will elaborate on the varying forms of cooperation ZOA engages in, and the religious-secular dynamics within these forms of cooperation.

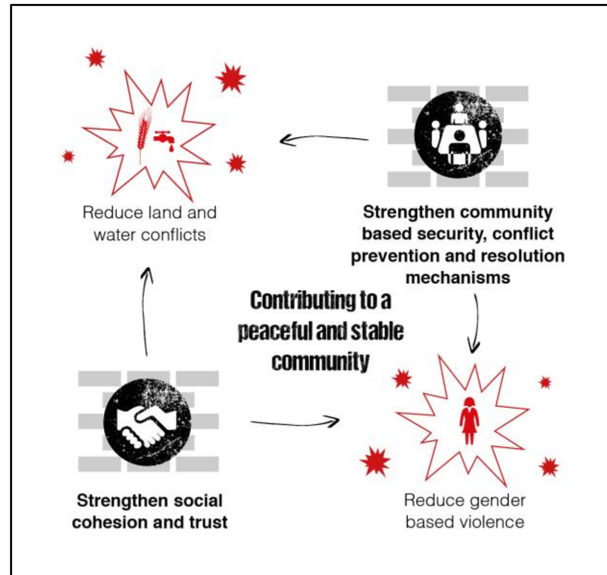
The case of ZOA

As mentioned in the introduction, ZOA is a Dutch, Christian INGO. It responds to humanitarian needs in contexts of armed conflict or natural disasters, with a focus on conflicts. The organization offers disaster response and programs for recovery in Burundi, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Liberia, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Uganda, and Yemen.[55] ZOA's activities are categorized in five sectors, namely 1) Food Security and Livelihoods (FSL), 2) Shelter, 3) Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), 4) Education, and 5) Peacebuilding. Through these sectors, the organization has been able to address a large scope of humanitarian needs. In these activities, it explicitly aims to offer aid based on needs, not dependent on people's religion, ethnicity, race or gender.

With regard to peacebuilding, ZOA intends to contribute to sustainable and positive peace. This means that the organization does not aim to solely reduce personal and direct violence, but also wants to increase justice, social cohesion and mutual acceptance.[56] Within its peacebuilding activities, ZOA distinguishes four focus areas: 1) strengthen social cohesion and trust, 2) strengthen community based security, conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms, 3) reducing land and water conflicts, and 4) reducing gender based violence (GBV). The first two focus areas represent more general preparatory peacebuilding processes on individual, family, and community level, but

[55] During this research in 2021, ZOA has phased out in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.
[56] ZOA, "ZOA Policy on Peacebuilding," ZOA (April 2017): 4, accessed April 27, 2021, https://www.zoa.nl/content/uploads/14042017-Peacebuilding-policy-final-and-approved.pdf.

also regarding structural mechanisms, including local governments. The latter two focus areas represent two specific types of conflicts that ZOA wants to address.[57] All focus areas try to strengthen capacity and accountability of local governments on these topics.



Picture 1, Focus areas ZOA Peacebuilding Policy Source: ZOA, "ZOA Policy on Peacebuilding," 7.

Focus area 1 aims to enable individuals to relate more positively to others, deal with trauma and increase self-confidence. Its rationale is that changes in individuals bring positive changes more broadly for the family, community and beyond. Examples are Community Based Sociotherapy (CBS) to strengthen non-violent and respectful behavior, and peace education in schools.[58]

The second focus area is aimed at the community level. Because formal justice systems in conflict-affected areas are often dysfunctional, alternative mechanisms for dispute resolution and restitution are needed. Therefore, ZOA intends to provide platforms to bring up security issues, to mediate local conflicts, and to dialogue with government and other security actors. For example, ZOA establishes and supports local peace committees, to detect and solve disputes. In addition, to make these bottom up committees more sustainable, ZOA links them to formal government actors, security actors and justice actors, like ministries or police.[59]

The third focus area aims to address conflicts related to land and water, for instance with regard to disputed access to land and water, or exclusion of specific groups on resources. Land and water are essential to many people, for example for human and animal consumption, and as prerequisite for sources of income. Many countries lack a formal and effective land registration system, which also prohibits people to build up sustainable livelihoods. Therefore, ZOA tries to

[57] ZOA, "ZOA Policy on Peacebuilding," 7.
[58] ZOA, "ZOA Policy on Peacebuilding," 9-10; ZOA, "Leaflet Peacebuilding 1 Strengthening Social Cohesion and Trust," ZOA, 1-2, accessed June 28, 2021, https://www.zoa-international.com/content/uploads/zoa-leaflet-1-peacebuilding-v6-HR.pdf.
[59] ZOA, "ZOA Policy on Peacebuilding," 10-11; ZOA, "Leaflet Peacebuilding 2 Strengthening Community Based Security, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms," ZOA, 1-2, accessed June 28, 2021, https://www.zoa-international.com/content/uploads/zoa-leaflet-2-peacebuilding-v5-HR.pdf.

mediate in land conflicts, improve land demarcation, and build up land registration systems in cooperation with government actors.[60]

The last focus area aims to reduce gender based violence (GBV). This can relate to domestic violence and rape, but also more generally to abuses to women and girls. GBV occurs in many contexts, both in and outside the family. It can have varying causes, amongst others relating to social norms about gender, perceptions on women and girls as inferior to men and boys, and alcohol addiction. Interventions of ZOA include challenging of social norms about gender and GBV, amongst others via mass media and training of women rights groups. Moreover, ZOA provides support to GBV survivors, and strengthens governments to address GBV.[61]

Trends in ZOA peacebuilding projects

For this thesis, I have made an inventory of the peacebuilding projects ZOA has implemented from 2017 to 2021.[62] This inventory is based on project proposals and annual country reviews for the years in which a country had peacebuilding projects. In the annexes, a list of the specific projects that are analyzed is included. From this inventory, we can derive trends and characteristics of ZOA's peacebuilding projects.

From 2017 to 2021, ZOA has implemented 52 peacebuilding projects of varying size and duration with a total budget of more than 22 million euros. 32 of these projects were fully focused on peacebuilding, whereas others combined it with other sectors, like Education. Peacebuilding projects

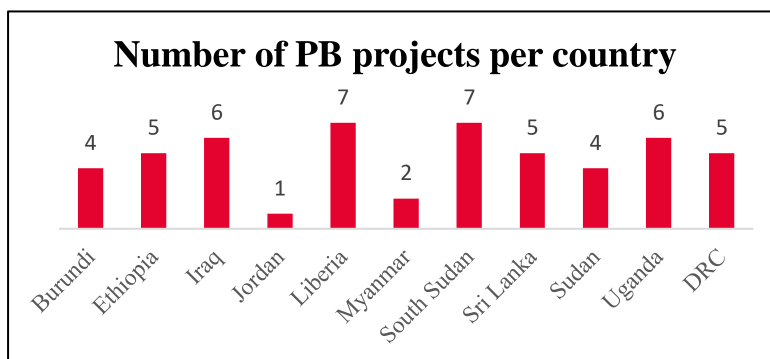


Figure 1, Number of peacebuilding projects per country
Source: developed by author

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[60] ZOA, "ZOA Policy on Peacebuilding," 11-12; ZOA, "Leaflet Peacebuilding 3 Reducing Land and Water Conflicts," ZOA, 1-2, accessed June 28, 2021, https://www.zoa-international.com/content/uploads/zoa-leaflet-3-peacebuilding-v5-HR.pdf; ZOA, "Making Land Rights Work: ZOA Land Rights Guidelines," ZOA (2019), accessed April 27, 2021, https://www.zoa-international.com/content/uploads/ZOA-land-rights-guidelines.pdf.

[61] ZOA, "ZOA Policy on Peacebuilding," 12-13.

[62] The decision to include projects from 2017 to 2021 derives from the fact that the last ZOA Peacebuilding Policy has been adopted in 2017. Therefore, these projects will be most representative for ZOA's current approach to peacebuilding.

took place in 11 countries, including Burundi, DRC, Ethiopia, Iraq, Jordan, Liberia, Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan, Sri Lanka and Uganda. The total number of projects per country varies between 1 and 7, with an average of 4 projects per country. Figure 1 displays the total number or projects per country.

Often, conflicts addressed by ZOA are secondary conflicts that are part of a larger context with a primary conflict between states or areas. For instance, ZOA works on land conflicts at community level that take place in the broader context of a failed state. Nevertheless, ZOA hardly ever operates in these higher level conflicts. Instead, in a majority of cases, ZOA intervenes at village and district level. Other levels on which ZOA projects take place are province and national. Sometimes, an intervention occurs on one of these levels, but combinations between levels often take place too. From 52 projects in total, 44 projects targeted the village level (58%). Of these, 20 projects combine the village level with district or other levels. ZOA has done only one intervention on national level. In figure 2, the distribution of ZOA intervention levels is visible.[63]

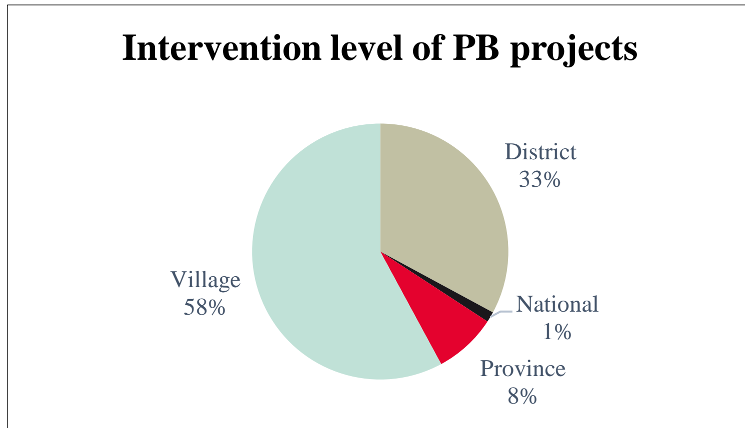

Figure 2, Intervention level of ZOA peacebuilding projects
Source: developed by author

In its peacebuilding projects, ZOA has addressed 8 types of conflict: land, water, religious, political, ethnic, family, GBV, and refugee/IDP versus host community conflicts.[64] Sometimes, a conflict can be categorized by one of these types, but often, multiple are applicable to one conflict, for instance a combination of political and ethnic conflicts. Figure 3 shows a distribution of the types of conflicts addressed by ZOA. A large majority of the conflicts ZOA addresses, are land and ethnic conflicts. These two types are addressed most frequently, but also in many different

[63] If a project occurred on multiple levels at the same time, these were split in separate entities in the analysis. The figure thus shows how often a specific level has been addressed through the projects, not the combination of levels. This applies as well to the figures on type of conflicts, focus areas, and local community actors. Here, projects could have multiple answers, but the figures show the number of times that a specific answers has been given.

[64] The difference between family and GBV conflicts is as follows. GBV is specifically aimed at women and girls, which can be both within a household and outside of the household. On the other hand, family conflict are conflicts between family members, which extends beyond conflicts between husbands and wives. Examples of family conflicts are conflicts between parents and children or between siblings.

countries. Land conflicts have been addressed in 8 countries, and ethnic conflicts in 7 countries. All other types of conflict have been addressed in a smaller number of countries. On average, ZOA address 3 types of conflicts per country. As an exception, 3 countries have solely focused on land conflicts.

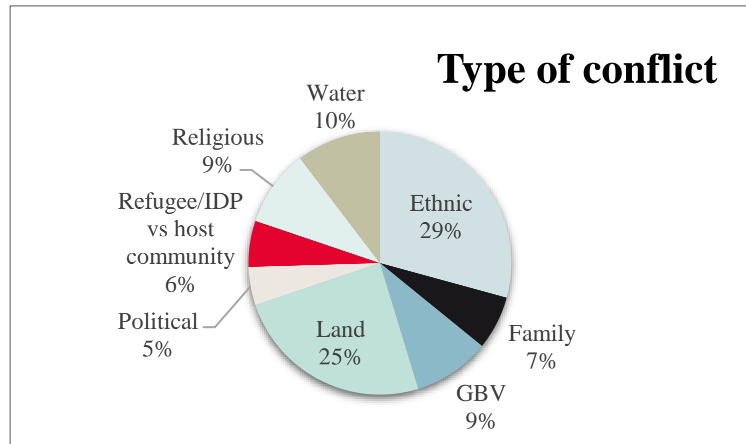

Figure 3, Type of conflicts addressed by ZOA
Source: developed by author

Lastly, as introduced earlier, ZOA distinguishes 4 focus areas. For this inventory, I added a fifth focus area, namely 5) *Strengthen good governance, civic trust, participation and accountability*, because many of ZOA's projects focus on good governance. In figure 4, a distribution of the focus areas can be found. Sometimes, a project had only one focus area, but often, multiple focus areas are combined in one project. In general, focus area 1 and 3 have been addressed most often, in respectively 30 projects (34%) and 20 projects (23%). On the other hand, focus area 4 was addressed in only 5 projects (6%) over 3 countries. Moreover, the added focus area 5 was addressed in 16 projects (18%) over 7 countries. Except for focus area 3 and 4, which are aimed at specific kinds of conflicts, all focus areas were applied to a wide variety of types of conflict, but all with a majority on ethnic and land conflicts. Especially, focus area 1 and 5 have been applied to all 8 types of conflict. After mapping these trends, it is good to discuss the actors ZOA engages with in peacebuilding.

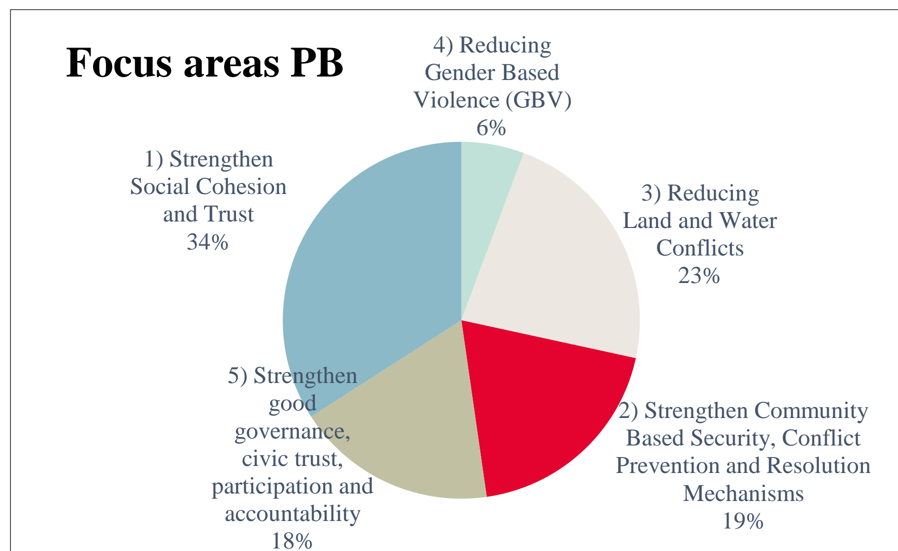

Figure 4, Distribution of focus areas in ZOA PB projects
Source: developed by author

Forms of cooperation in peacebuilding

ZOA engages with a wide variety of actors in peacebuilding, and these relationships each have different forms, goals, and implications. It is difficult to make clear-cut categories of these relationships, because in reality, categories easily overlap. Moreover, the different contexts in which ZOA works, makes it difficult to generalize and render justice to situations on the ground. Nevertheless, the following distinctions might help to reduce some complexity.

ZOA cooperates with actors on international and grassroots level. International actors are often large-scale organizations, like INGOs or UN agencies, whom ZOA partners with to shape and coordinate projects, but not necessarily to implement a project on the ground.[65] In general, these international partnerships are high-level, strategic forms of cooperation, which include issues of funding and coordination. However, for this thesis, it is more helpful to gain insights on the actors whom ZOA cooperates with to implement a project. Those actors namely have more influence on the peacebuilding process itself. Therefore, this research will focus on actors on grassroots level, which both includes local, provincial and national levels.

The heterogeneous group of actors on grassroots level is schematically represented in figure 5. We can distinguish between *NGO partners, local governments* and *local stakeholders*. NGO partners are organizations that function as implementing partners, whom ZOA cooperates with on the ground to implement a project. These local NGOs are non-profit organizations that are registered at the local government with a legal status, and are formally

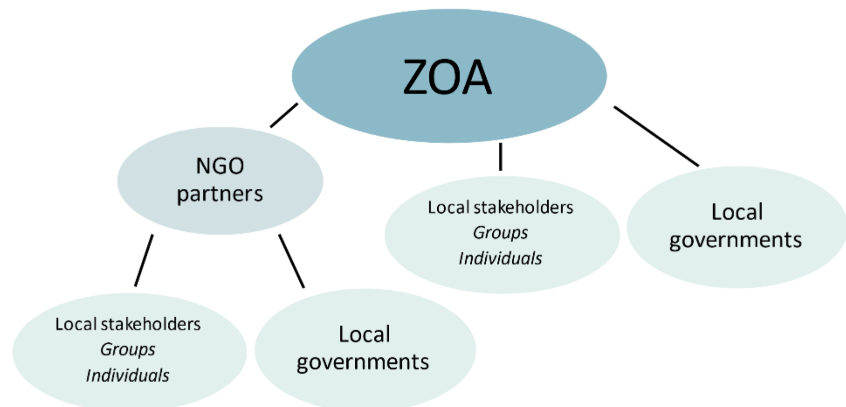

Figure 5, ZOA forms of cooperation on grassroots level
Source: developed by author

[65] International partnerships can take up the form of consortia, in which ZOA cooperates with other INGOs to receive funding for and coordinate large-scale projects. Within such a consortium, ZOA can be the lead or a consortium member. Moreover, ZOA sometimes fulfills the position of implementing partner for another INGO or UN agency that takes the lead in a project.

organized, with often paid staff. They sign a contract with ZOA, and therefore have formal responsibilities for their tasks.[66]

Local governments can refer to varying authorities on local, and incidentally on national levels, like local administration, police, or ministries. With local governments, formal agreements are often made as well. In some cases, these agreements are on a division of tasks, but in many cases, these relate to gaining access to an area in the first place.

In contrast to NGO partners and local governments, formal agreements are often not made with local stakeholders. They mostly do not have formal responsibilities for the tasks they take up in a project. Although local stakeholders are a diverse group as well, their common denominator is that they derive from the context in which they operate. They are strongly rooted in their community and often have an interest to serve the community. This sets them apart from local NGOs and local governments, that do not always derive from the communities they work in.

A distinction can be made within the group of local stakeholders between *groups* and *individuals,* based on their degree of organization. Local stakeholder groups are organized groups of people. The category can refer to community based organizations (CBOs), like peace committees or local civil society organizations (CSOs). The category includes institutions as well, like schools or religious institutions. These can either be community based or in some cases even national. On the other hand, the category of local stakeholder individuals refers more to people from the community that are included in projects, but are not organized in a wider group, like women or youth leaders. ZOA works deliberately with these individuals because they have experience in the communities, but also because of their influence on the peacebuilding process, both positive and negative. This influence derives from their position in the community or their relation to the conflict. Based on a conflict analysis in which stakeholders are mapped, relevant individuals for the projects are selected. In some cases, such individuals are nominated by the communities themselves as well.

For ZOA, cooperation with local stakeholders is important, because they are strongly rooted in the contexts. Therefore, they have expertise in the activities employed, knowledge about the contexts they work in, legitimacy in the community and access to areas that might otherwise be difficult to reach. Moreover, community structures are often relevant structures for people in

[66] ZOA, "ZOA Policy for partnering with local NGOs," ZOA (March 2018), 9, accessed April 27, 2021, https://www.zoa-international.com/content/uploads/ZOA-policy-for-partnering-with-local-NGOs-final-29032018.pdf.

conflict and post-conflict settings, in which many other organizations and structures are not present anymore. Therefore, cooperation with local stakeholders enhances the effectivity of a project, but also contributes to its sustainability.[67] As visible in figure 5, ZOA sometimes works directly with local stakeholders and local governments to implement a project. In other cases, ZOA partners with a local NGO, that in turn partners with local stakeholders and local governments.[68]

Table 1 displays the concrete groups of people ZOA cooperates with. The category of 'NGO partners' relates to local NGOs. 'Local governments' refers to local authorities, like police or local administration. 'Local stakeholders' are divided between 'groups' and 'individuals'. 'Local stakeholder groups' refers to religious institutions, CSOs, schools, peace committees, and political parties. 'Local stakeholder individuals' includes customary or traditional leaders, religious leaders, youth, women, refugees, and IDPs. For the sake of clarity, CSOs are local non-profit organizations, like women rights groups, with whom ZOA does not sign a formal contract as partner, but that are for instance trained to enhance their capacity. This sets CSOs apart from NGO partners. Political parties can both be at local and national level. Because they are part of civil society, they are included in the category of local stakeholders. Schools refer to the context of a school in which support is provided, for instance in cooperation with teachers. The difference between a religious leader and a religious institution is that the category of religious leader refers to him or her as an individual, whereas a religious institution refers to the broader institution with its members as a whole.

Actors ZOA cooperates with in peacebuilding projects			
NGO partners	**Local governments**	**Local stakeholders – groups**	**Local stakeholders – individuals**
		Religious institutions	Customary/traditional leaders
		Schools	Religious leaders
		Civil society organizations	Youth
		Peace committees	Women
		Political parties	Refugees
			IDPs

Table 1, List of actors ZOA cooperates with in peacebuilding projects
Source: developed by author

[67] ZOA, "Community Capacity Enhancement Policy Paper," ZOA (July 2011), 4-9, accessed April 27, 2021, ZOA internal resource library.
[68] ZOA, "Community Capacity Enhancement Policy Paper," 14.

Religious and secular dynamics in cooperation

Now, we will have a look at the frequency and nature of these forms of cooperation, and the religious backgrounds of these groups. This discussion is again based on the inventory of the 52 peacebuilding projects from 2017-2021.

With regard to local NGO partners, ZOA has cooperated with a local NGO as implementing partner in 31 projects, which is 60% of the projects. Cooperation with NGO partners occurs in all types of conflict and on all levels of intervention. For most types of conflict, the division of projects with and without cooperation is balanced. Nevertheless, in family, GBV and religious conflicts, NGO cooperation is almost always present. Across countries, most countries have both projects with and without NGO partner cooperation. Most of these countries have a majority of projects with NGO cooperation.

Regarding the religious background of these NGOs, 66% is secular. These NGOs are categorized as 'secular', because they either not explicitly present themselves as religious or explicitly present themselves as non-religious. NGOs are categorized as 'religious' here when they present themselves as such. The religious NGOs ZOA cooperates with are mostly Christian. In one country, ZOA cooperated with an interfaith NGO in two projects. Both cooperation with Christian NGOs and secular NGOs occurred each in 6 countries.

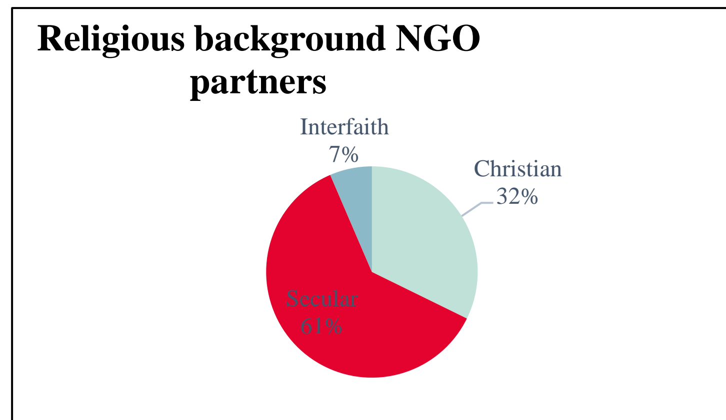

Figure 6, Religious background local NGO partners
Source: developed by author

In addition, ZOA has cooperated with local governments in 28 projects in 10 countries. Henceforth, local governments are not only most frequently targeted, but also in almost all country contexts. Moreover, local governments have been included in all types of conflict, all levels of intervention and in all focus areas. Most often, local governments have been included in land conflicts. Moreover, in ethnic conflicts and projects aimed at good governance, local governments are most frequently targeted. With regard to religious background, local governments can be

categorized as secular. As an entity, they are namely part of the secular governments of the countries in which ZOA works.

With regard to the local stakeholders, ZOA often includes multiple categories of stakeholders in one project. Figure 7 shows in how many projects the different local stakeholders have been included. ZOA most often works with peace committees, women, youth, and customary or traditional leaders. These groups are included in the highest numbers of projects and types of conflict. Peace committees have been included in all 8 types of conflict, whereas women, youth, and customary or traditional leaders have been included in all types of conflicts except for one. On the other hand, refugees and IDPs have been included in a small number of countries, because these groups are only present in a few specific contexts in which ZOA works. Political parties have been included in 3 countries, in projects that specifically aim to increase good governance and women inclusion in governance, or projects that aim to increase social cohesion, amongst others in cases of political conflicts.

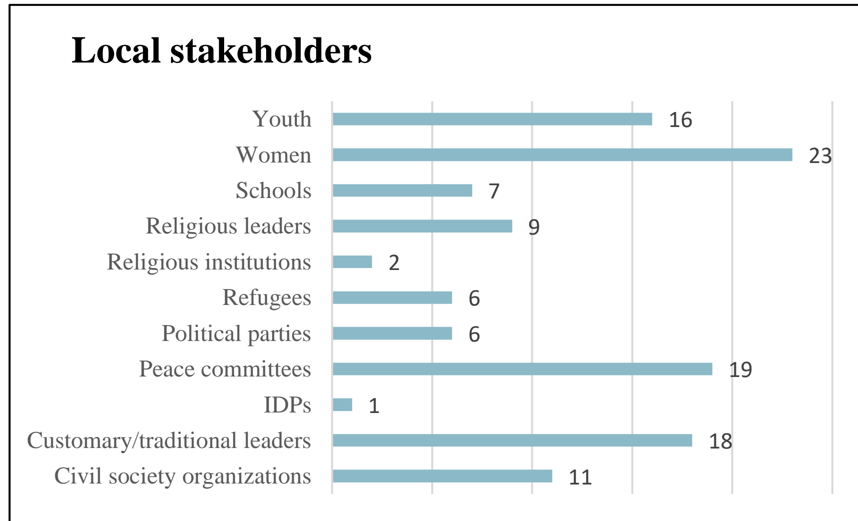

Figure 7, Distribution of local stakeholders, both groups and individuals
Source: developed by author

Within the group of local community actors, 2 groups of actors can be found that explicitly present themselves as religious, namely religious institutions and religious leaders. Together, these groups are included in 11 projects. However, religious leaders are significantly more included than religious institutions. Religious leaders have been included in all types of conflict, except for refugee or IDP versus host community conflicts. Moreover, they have been included in 6 countries and on all levels on intervention. On the other hand, religious institutions have only been included in 2 projects, with 2 types of conflict, namely ethnic and religious conflicts. Moreover, these projects were in 2 countries, and only on village and district levels. In addition, the only form of religious institution that has been involved are churches. In contrast, ZOA has cooperated with religious leaders from different religious backgrounds.

In sum, the inventory of ZOA's peacebuilding projects has shown that ZOA currently mainly works with secular actors, including local governments, secular NGOs and secular local stakeholders. The actors ZOA cooperates with, that explicitly present themselves as religious, are religious NGOs, religious leaders, and religious institutions. Whereas religious institutions are only rarely included, religious leaders and religious NGOs are more frequently engaged with. In addition, a majority of these religious groups are Christian.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that this inventory has only looked at groups or people that *present themselves* as religious. It is thus based on actors' self-understanding, and approaches these groups as homogeneous. This means that I have not looked at the individuals that are part of this group which might be religious personally. In other words, it is important to be careful with classifications, because the way a group presents itself may not necessarily represent the religiosity of the individuals that are part of it. Because a majority of the people in the contexts in which ZOA works are religious, we can assume that many individuals within these secular groups are in fact religious themselves. Therefore, ZOA might on the ground interact more with 'religion' or 'religious people' than the results of the inventory suggest. The way these religious and secular dynamics work out in reality are probably more complex than a simple distinction between religious and secular categories based on an actor's self-understanding. Therefore, the next chapter will further look at the ways these religious and secular dynamics work out on the ground in ZOA's peacebuilding projects by discussing the ideas and experiences of ZOA staff on these issues.

Chapter IV *Cooperation, religious actors and ZOA's Christian identity*

This chapter presents the results of the interviews with ZOA staff. First, I shortly discuss my methodology. Thereafter, I elaborate on the ideas of ZOA staff members on cooperation with actors in general, and on religious actors in particular. Lastly, I discuss staff's ideas on the meaning and influence of ZOA's Christian identity on these decisions for cooperation and on peacebuilding in general.

Methodology

For this thesis, I conducted ten interviews via Microsoft Teams with staff members working in the Dutch headquarters and in country contexts ZOA works, including Liberia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Uganda. Within this country staff, I tried to balance between national staff, working in the country they are coming from, and expat staff, coming from another country. Six interview participants were male, and four were female. Further, most of the staff members identified as Christians, one as Muslim, and two as atheists. Nine of the interviews were conducted with current ZOA staff members, and one with a former ZOA staff member.[69] In the annexes, an anonymized list of interview participants and general interview guide are included. By interviewing people from varying positions in the organization, and from different contexts, including differences in religious demography, conflicts and decisions on engagement with religious actors, I have tried to create a representative selection of the organization.

After interviewing, I transcribed each interview based on a recording, and coded those transcripts. First, I deductively applied preliminary codes to the transcripts and collected these. Thereafter, I formulated categories and general codes based on the preliminary codes. Lastly, I went through the transcripts again to apply the newly formed codes, and to check whether important data was missing.

[69] I have decided to interview this former ZOA staff member, because he was involved in a unique peacebuilding project with religious actors, that was relevant for this thesis.

General reasons for cooperation

Interview participants gave various arguments for cooperation with other actors in peacebuilding. Generally, these can be categorized as *strategic* or *goal-oriented*. As one interviewee said: "[you consider] what would you like to achieve and with whom should you work to achieve that goal?". ZOA's goal is by many interviewees identified as relieving suffering and providing support to people in need. Therefore, they believe that ZOA's support should be based on the needs of the people they serve. Consequently, cooperation with other actors should be informed by the relevance of an actor to contribute to that goal.

This relevance is in turn translated in multiple ways, which are schematically shown in figure 8. In the middle, there are two overarching arguments that ZOA staff gave for cooperation with other actors. Around those two arguments are nine other reasons that contribute to the overarching arguments.

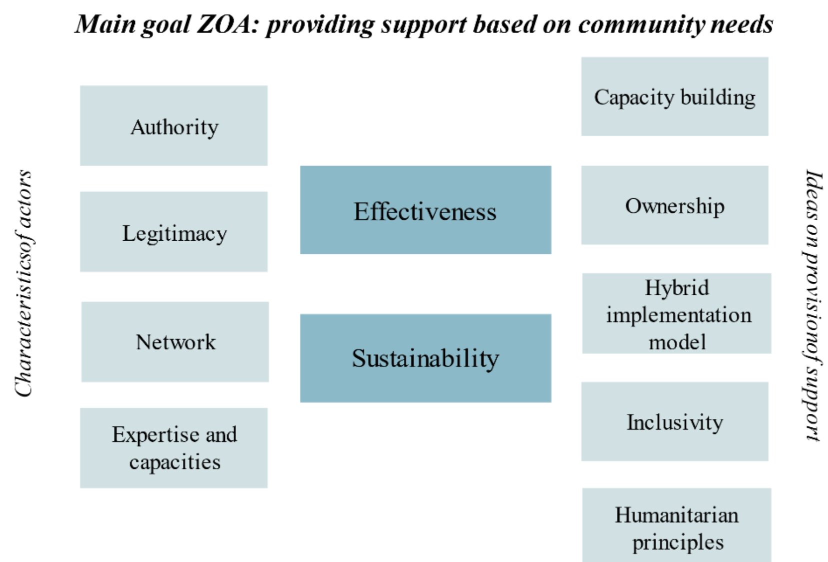

Figure 8, Main reasons mentioned by interview participants for cooperation with other actors in peacebuilding
Source: developed by author

The first overarching argument is *effectiveness*. This means that cooperation needs to be a relevant addition, which increases ZOA's ability to provide support for the needs present in the communities and to work on the root causes of conflict. Cooperation with an actor should thus make support more effective. If an actor namely helps ZOA to better respond to community needs, a project will be more relevant for the community.

The second overarching argument is *sustainability*. This means that cooperation with other actors is aimed to ensure that the support provided by ZOA is durable. As one interviewee stated: "Particularly on peacebuilding, [...] your plan is that ZOA will not exist forever in that location." With sustainability, ZOA tries to provide longer term solutions for the structural problems a

community faces, and to enable a community to work on those needs after ZOA leaves. Therefore, ZOA strongly focuses on cooperation with local and community actors, rather than solely working through other (I)NGOs.

Participants shared nine other reasons, which are more concrete manifestations or translations of effectiveness and sustainability. The reasons include helpful characteristics of actors in providing support, and more general ideas on how support should be provided. If an actor meets one or multiple of these factors, ZOA staff is more willing to cooperate with that actor. Conversely, if an actor does not meet one or more of these reasons, ZOA might be hesitant to cooperate.

The first reason to cooperate with other actors is their *authority* in a community. Authority can derive from varying sources, but generally relates to a position of (political) power. Actors with authority have a visible and powerful position within their community, which enables them to make decisions and influence the attitudes and behavior of community members. Therefore, they can serve as mobilizers in both positive and negative ways. Consequently, cooperating with them might significantly increase the effectiveness and sustainability of a project by encouraging their positive and reducing negative influences. Moreover, ZOA can make its bottom up peacebuilding initiatives more durable through the influence of these actors by linking the projects to influential political actors or institutions. Simultaneously, ZOA might cooperate with these actors, because it needs permission or approval to work in an area. Examples of actors with authority are customary or traditional leaders, political leaders, or local authorities, like local governments and police.

Moreover, ZOA deliberately cooperates with actors with *legitimacy*. Although this relates to authority, legitimacy is more connected to trust and credibility. Actors with legitimacy are accepted, respected and trusted by the community. Therefore, they are able to reach community members and influence their attitudes and behavior. If actors are not perceived as legitimate or suspicions exist about them, community members are often less willing to change their behavior and attitudes. In such a case, ZOA would be more hesitant to cooperate. Consequently, an actor’s legitimacy strongly influences the effectiveness and sustainability of a project, because legitimate actors are better able to contribute to longer term solutions and deeper changes in conflict situations.

In addition, actors with large *networks* can significantly contribute to the effectiveness and sustainability of ZOA’s peacebuilding projects. Although this argument relates to legitimacy and authority, the argument of network refers more to a social capacity, namely to the number of people

an actor is able to reach. As a hub, they can disseminate information about ZOA's projects to the community. Simultaneously, they can provide information about the community to ZOA, because they know many people. Consequently, they enable ZOA to reach more people, which helps to make support more relevant and durable. In particular, ZOA might cooperate with these actors when starting in an area, because they are helpful as entry points to a community. An example are teachers at schools, who can disseminate peacebuilding messages to children, which in turn bring it to their homes.

To better respond to a community's needs, ZOA's decisions to cooperate are strongly informed as well by an actor's *expertise and capacities*. Especially for local NGOs, ZOA looks for partners that have experience or knowledge on a topic or the context in which a project takes place. These can namely add to ZOA's own capacities, and ZOA might learn from them. For local NGOs, ZOA has a partner policy, with guidelines on financial and operational capacities an NGO should have.[70] These forms of cooperation enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the projects, because available knowledge and skills are used in an efficient way.

Simultaneously, ZOA also often decides to work with a local NGO or other local actor with the aim of *capacity building*. In those situations, actors do not have all skills required to effectively engage in peacebuilding yet. However, considering the fact that they will stay in the communities after ZOA has left, ZOA wants to improve their ability to work on peacebuilding. Often, capacity building takes up the form of training individuals, existing structures or newly set up structures, like peace committees. In these trainings, ZOA increases their knowledge and skills on relevant topics, amongst others conflict prevention, mediation and trauma healing. Moreover, ZOA makes sure that networks are in place, so that they have the ability to discuss their problems and cooperate. ZOA also offers support to them if there are issues they cannot solve themselves. In addition, ZOA links these bottom up peacebuilding initiatives to relevant other stakeholders in the contexts, like local or even national authorities. By focusing on capacity building, ZOA prevents to take over the role of existing local structures and enhances the sustainability and effectiveness of projects.

Relating to capacity building, *ownership* is an important argument for ZOA to cooperate with local actors. As one interview participant stated: '[Peace is] not something that you can bring in from the outside.' ZOA wants to provide actors with a sense of ownership, and responsibility

[70] ZOA, "ZOA Policy for partnering with local NGOs," ZOA (March 2018), accessed April 27, 2021, https://www.zoa-international.com/content/uploads/ZOA-policy-for-partnering-with-local-NGOs-final-29032018.pdf.

for their lives and communities. Thereby, community members are more motivated to actively participate in projects. Naturally, this ensures effectiveness and sustainability, because the active participation of community members contributes to longer term solutions.

Another form in which ZOA tries to ensure sustainability and effectiveness is its *hybrid implementation model.* ZOA tries to localize support, by deliberately working both with own staff on the ground and cooperating with local NGOs. The organization aims to increasingly work with local NGOs and build their capacities to respond to community needs. In addition to this point, ZOA also actively tries to hire local staff instead of solely working with expat staff.

To ensure that the needs of all community members are well represented, *inclusivity* can be a reason for ZOA to cooperate. ZOA consciously tries to cooperate with a wide variety of actors to make sure that it reaches as many people as possible. This increases both a project's sustainability and effectiveness, because ZOA is better able to respond to the problems of all community members and is thereby able to provide better and durable solutions. For example, ZOA might decide to work with local NGOs from different ethnic or religious backgrounds, to make the project more representative.

In relation to this, several interviewees referred to the *humanitarian principles* of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. According to them, ZOA should base cooperation with other actors on a community's needs, instead of selecting based on background. Several staff related the humanitarian principles as well to the expression of ZOA's Christian identity, which I will discuss at the end of this chapter.

The abovementioned reasons for ZOA staff to cooperate with other actors are mainly based on ideas how support should be provided. This shows that ZOA staff makes informed decisions on cooperation. However, these informed decisions are not solely based on their own ideas. In addition, there are other factors deriving from the context that staff takes into account. These factors will be discussed in the next section.

Other factors influencing cooperation

Besides the abovementioned ideas, interviewees have mentioned more general factors that influence their decisions on cooperation. These factors can make ZOA both more hesitant or more willing to cooperate with certain actors.

First, a very concrete factor that influences ZOA's decisions is *staff security*. If engagement with an actor would be dangerous for staff, ZOA might decide to not cooperate with that actor.

Moreover, decisions to cooperate are informed by *donor influences*, both institutional and constituency donors. Because ZOA is financially dependent on them, it needs to anticipate on their decisions and perceptions to some extent. In some cases, donors have asked ZOA to cooperate with a certain actor, which ZOA agreed to. On the other hand, donors might have negative perceptions on certain actors and refuse a project proposal if ZOA would cooperate with them. That might be a reason for ZOA to not cooperate with that actor.

Furthermore, ZOA might decide to not cooperate with an actor because of their or ZOA's own *reputation***.** Cooperation with certain actors might influence other actors' perceptions of ZOA**.** ZOA staff takes into consideration both the perceptions of other actors within a community it works and in the humanitarian field at large. For example, if actors are sensitive, cooperation could generate suspicions and negative perceptions on ZOA. Negative perceptions can in turn decrease ZOA's credibility, and thereby the funds it receives to implement projects. Especially in cases of actors with strong (political) agendas, ZOA might be hesitant to cooperate because of the risk of being seen as politicized or taking sides. As an example, multiple interviewees mentioned terrorist groups as actors they feel hesitant to cooperate with, because of the strong (political) agenda these groups tend to have and donors' anti-terrorist policies.

In addition, many interview participants are mindful of the fact that actors can have a *dual role* in conflicts. All actors have both the potential to perpetuate and resolve a conflict. Therefore, to sustainably work on the drivers of conflict, ZOA ideally interacts with all of them, including actors that are actively perpetuating conflicts. By interacting with them, ZOA could help to change their attitudes and behavior, and thereby to reduce violence. Moreover, if ZOA would not interact with them, they could feel marginalized. That could in turn impede a project's effectiveness, because those actors might hinder a project.

In relation to the dual role actors can have, most interviewees emphasized the importance of *context mapping* in ZOA's decisions to cooperate with other actors. They explained that decisions to cooperate are highly context specific. Henceforth, it is very important for ZOA to understand the context in which a project takes place. Amongst others, ZOA needs to understand the conflict, its context, and its stakeholders. The role of stakeholders can strongly vary per context. A good conflict analysis helps ZOA to make decisions on the actors to cooperate with.

Together, the ideas on how aid should be provided and the other factors deriving from the context are taken into consideration by ZOA for decisions on cooperation. Especially the other factors discussed in this section show the reflexibility and knowledgeability of ZOA in making informed decisions on aid provision. ZOA's decisions dynamically respond to other actors and influences in the contexts it works. After discussing reasons for cooperation with all kinds of actors, I will now elaborate on considerations for cooperation with religious actors.

Cooperation with religious actors

Interview participants have elaborated on their experiences and ideas of cooperating with religious actors in peacebuilding too. An important reflection of these discussions is that in most ZOA contexts, there is an *unconsciousness* or *unintentionality* in decisions on cooperating with religious actors. This means that there are no clear policy guidelines on how ZOA should relate to religion or religious actors in peacebuilding. In the peacebuilding policy, one sentence is included that specific attention will be paid to the role of faith-based organizations and religion.[71] However, in other documents and in conversations with staff members, no clear guidelines on these issues are expressed.

This can partly be explained by the fact that ZOA works in many different contexts, with different religious backgrounds and varying roles of religion in those contexts. For example, working with imams will be a more natural thing to do in Sudan, whereas in South Sudan, more Christian leaders will probably be found. Nevertheless, because general guidelines do not exist, ZOA rarely decides deliberately to cooperate with religious actors. Instead, these decisions strongly depend on the context in which a project takes place, and on the perceptions of involved staff. Especially, the perceptions of management staff are important, because they are final decision makers on cooperation. Although some exceptions exist, religious actors are often not specifically or consciously targeted in projects.

However, in practice, ZOA often cooperates with religious actors, in particular with religious leaders. The decision to cooperate with them is informed by *instrumentality*. Religious

[71] ZOA, "ZOA Policy on Peacebuilding," 5.

actors are not cooperated with for the fact that they are religious, but for their ability to provide more sustainable and effective support, just like other actors.

Figure 9 shows the main considerations participants shared to engage with religious actors. These are a combination of ZOA's own ideas on relevant actors, other factors deriving from the context that influence decisions, and ideas on the relevance of religion. Together, they show again how ZOA makes informed decisions, based on its ability to reflect on itself and other actors.

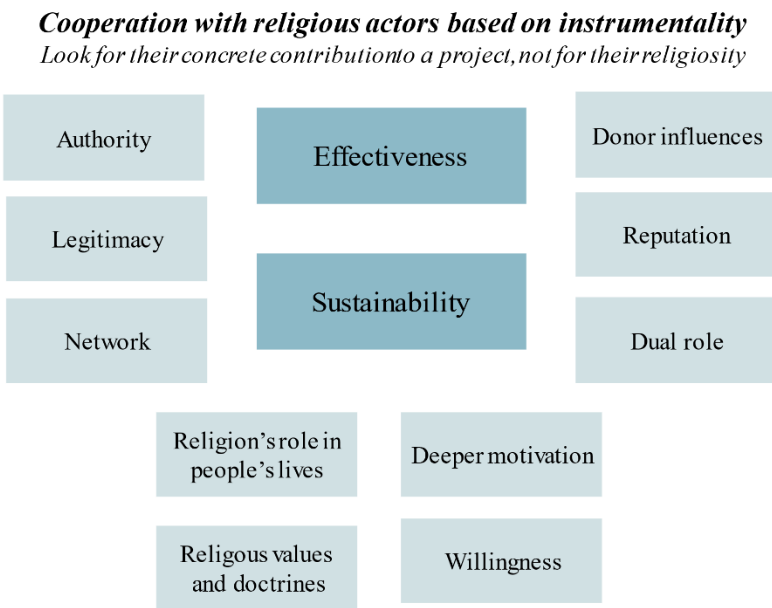

Figure 9, Main reasons mentioned by interview participants for cooperation with religious actors in peacebuilding
Source: developed by author

Cooperation with religious leaders happens regularly in practice, because they meet many of the earlier mentioned factors that make actors relevant for cooperation. Religious leaders significantly contribute to a project's *sustainability*, because they are deeply embedded in the communities. Working with them thus ensures that a project's activities can continue after ZOA leaves. Moreover, because of religious leaders' embeddedness in the communities, the *effectiveness* of projects increases. Their stance in the community enables ZOA to better respond to the needs of the people. The reason that religious leaders are embedded in their communities results from the following factors.

Religious leaders have a congregation, which functions as a *network*. Through religious leaders, ZOA can easily disseminate and receive information. Therefore, churches can be used as entry point to the community at the start of a project area. In addition, through the information religious leaders disseminate to community members, they can act as mobilizers for a project, which can make it more effective.

Moreover, religious leaders tend to have *legitimacy*. Often, they are respected, trusted and accepted by community members. Therefore, they are especially suitable to engage in conflict mediation and peacebuilding. In many cases, religious leaders traditionally have had a role in conflict resolution and mediation as well. This increases their capacity to influence attitudes and behavior. In addition, one interviewee explained that cooperating with a religious leader can help to base trust for ZOA's own work. Because the community members trust and respect a religious leader, they tend to respect ZOA more as well, if ZOA cooperates with that leader.

In addition to the former two arguments, many religious leaders have *authority* in their communities. Because of their constituency, but also their legitimacy, they have influence and a powerful, visible position in the community. Moreover, they are often more educated. Due to these factors, religious leaders often have the role of decision makers, and their decisions tend to be respected. By their ability to influence the attitudes of community members, religious actors can function as mobilizers.

Nevertheless, just like other actors, religion and religious actors can play a *dual role*. Both have the potential to connect and divide in conflicts. Therefore, religious leaders' influential, legitimate positions and the large networks they have, can positively or negatively influence projects. Henceforth, by cooperating with religious actors, ZOA can encourage them to have a positive influence on peacebuilding and minimize their negative effects. When ZOA would not work with them, these leaders could negatively influence the project by stirring up the population or disseminate negative information about the projects.

In relation to this, the *reputation* of a religious actor influences ZOA's decision to cooperate. If a religious leader is sensitive or strongly politicized, cooperation might generate risks for ZOA's own reputation. Such forms of cooperation could namely lead to perceptions that ZOA is biased.

Therefore, *context mapping* is very important for religious actors as well. Before deciding to cooperate with religious actors, it is important that ZOA is aware of their position in the conflict. In some situations, religious leaders could be part of a conflict themselves. Henceforth, it is important for ZOA to do a sound conflict analysis before deciding to cooperate.

Lastly, decisions to cooperate with religious actors are influenced by *donors*. Donors might have both negative and positive perceptions on religion and religious actors. For example, in a few past cases, ZOA has offered support to local churches because Dutch churches, which are part of

ZOA's constituency based donors, asked the organization to do so. Based on those requests, ZOA has supported specific local churches with the money of these Dutch churches, amongst others in church constructions and provision of religious materials, like hymn books or Bibles. On the other hand, negative perceptions of donors on religious actors could make ZOA refuse to work with them in specific projects.

Relevance of religion and religious actors

Besides applying these more general arguments on religious actors, interviewees mentioned several ways in which religion, or the religiosity of religious actors, is relevant for peacebuilding. It is noteworthy that all interviewees gave an affirmative answer to the question whether religion has an added value for peacebuilding. The concrete added value they mentioned is summarized in the following points.

A lot of interviewees acknowledged the important *role of religion in people's lives.* They explained that religion plays an integral role in the lives of many of ZOA's beneficiaries, but also more broadly in the societies in which ZOA works. This important position of religion in social and human life makes religion and religious actors relevant for peacebuilding. By not acknowledging this relevance, ZOA would misunderstand the context in which it works. The argument of religion's role in people's lives relates to the argument of inclusivity. Because religion and religious actors are relevant in the contexts in which ZOA works, it is important to have those people included to be representative.

Another often-mentioned argument is the *deeper motivation* religion could bring to pursue peace. Many interviewees explain that religion relates to people's attitudes, behavior, perceptions and world views. For peacebuilding, it is crucial to not only change people's concrete behavioral patterns, but also the attitudes and ways they relate to each other. If this deeper, inside change does not take place, conflict resolution will not generate long-term solutions. To achieve such a change, religion can be mobilized by people to overcome the impact of crisis, both at personal and societal level. Because of the strong influence religion can have on people's behavior and attitudes, religion can be helpful for people to deal with trauma, anger, hate and societal divisions. In other words, people can be motivated by religion to more fundamentally change their attitude towards a conflict and others, and this deeper motivation enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of projects.

Relating to the idea of deeper motivation is the argument of the relevance of *religious values and doctrines.* Most religions contain unifying values, rules and ideas, which are authoritative for its followers. Therefore, almost all interviewees acknowledge that pointing people on these values might motivate them to pursue peace. Participants mentioned values like forgiveness, hope, reconciliation, and the duty to love and respect one another. However, one interviewee mentioned as well that ZOA does not often deliberately tap into religious ideas or biblical teachings in projects. Nevertheless, several interviewees explained how religious leaders sometimes ask during meetings to shortly speak some words to the participants, or how other participants often make references to the Bible, for example in Community Based Sociotherapy (CBS).

The last argument that was mentioned in interviews is the *willingness* of religious leaders to act as peacemakers. Religious leaders might already perceive themselves as peacebuilders or might easier feel comfortable with this position. The fact that religious leaders are often willing to support a project, makes them relevant and helpful.

Examples of cooperation with religious actors

To illustrate the ways in which religious actors and ideas are involved in peacebuilding, interview participants mentioned several examples. This section will elaborate on the forms that either occurred most frequently, or were especially relevant.

Most frequently, religious leaders are involved in *peace committees*. Besides other influential community members, like women or youth leaders, religious leaders are included in these committees because of their legitimacy and authority. In some contexts, religious leaders are not deliberately included, but tend to be included because of nominations of community members. In a few contexts, ZOA deliberately includes religious leaders, next to the inclusion of other influential leaders.

Religious leaders are sometimes also involved in resolving *land right conflicts*. Here, ZOA also not deliberately targets religious leaders to engage in conflict mediation. As one interviewee explained, land rights is a rather 'technical' or 'secular' issue, which is not framed in religious ways in the contexts in which ZOA works. However, in practice, people often ask for religious leaders to be involved in conflict mediation. One participant explained that resolving land rights issues is

about "who do you trust". Since religious leaders are often trusted, people involved in land conflicts tend to ask them to be involved in conflict mediation.

Another concrete activity in which religious leaders are involved is in lay *trauma counseling and CBS*. As a form of capacity building, ZOA offers training to religious leaders to do lay trauma counseling, which enables them to help traumatized members within and outside of their congregation. With regard to CBS, religious leaders can be involved as participants, that in turn can spread the information in their networks. On the other hand, religious leaders can also be engaged in CBS as facilitators, leading the sessions. In this form, religious leaders are thus engaged as builders of social cohesion and trust for both individuals and communities at large.

In addition, there are two more unique cases with *specific targeting of pastors* to become active peacebuilders in their community. These pastors were trained in trauma counseling skills, but also in reaching out to be a positive factor in the wider community beyond their own church. This was done by trainings on Biblical teachings in peacebuilding, but also in practical ways to engage in peacebuilding. For example, the pastors received training on spreading positive peace messages through their preaching and on dealing with conflicts within their congregation or the community. Thereby, the pastors were challenged to more actively contribute to peace within their own religious community, but also in the wider community.

Lastly, in another unique case, ZOA has *mobilized Biblical teachings* to work on gender based violence (GBV). Here, the project deliberately included religious leaders to work on GBV awareness and prevention. Moreover, it offered support to GBV survivors. In the project, the religious leaders and ZOA used Biblical teachings to talk with participants about GBV and raise awareness on this issue. They looked together at the role of women, men and gender more generally in the Bible. Thereby, they made both men and women more aware of their roles and responsibilities as wives and husbands.

ZOA's Christian identity

As a Christian NGO, ZOA is a religious actor itself as well. Therefore, besides discussing cooperation with religious actors, I asked the interviewees for their ideas on the meaning and influence of ZOA's identity on cooperation with other actors and on peacebuilding. Similar to the lack of policy on religion and religious actors, there is a certain *unconsciousness* among ZOA staff

about the meaning and influence of ZOA's identity on peacebuilding and cooperation, because the organization lacks explicit policies on these issues. However, many participants showed to have personal ideas about it.

A reflection that was mentioned in most interviews was the difference for staff in the *personal versus organizational level*. Although Christian values serve for many staff as a personal motivation for their work, they perceive it as inappropriate to express their faith in the projects or to let their Christian beliefs influence the quality of the projects, for instance by only serving Christian beneficiaries. Almost all participants emphasized that ZOA offers support to beneficiaries of all backgrounds, and does not discriminate based on religious background. They argue that support should be based on the needs of a community, and cooperation on the relevance for successful completion of the project. Consequently, ZOA's Christian identity may not influence the quality of its project on the ground. ZOA staff thus makes a split between personal motivations and organizational practices.

In this regard, it is important to note that ZOA does not explicitly present itself as a Christian organization in all countries it works. As explained in the introduction to this thesis, ZOA strongly values its Christian identity. Christian values serve as a motivation for ZOA's work, and in the Netherlands, ZOA presents itself as a Christian organization. In countries with a Christian majority population or in which religion is not a sensitive issue, ZOA often presents itself as Christian too. However, in countries with a Muslim majority population or countries in which religion could be sensitive, ZOA often rather presents itself as a Christian value based INGO. That namely enables the organization to reach more beneficiaries, because community members from other religious backgrounds could be more hesitant to cooperate or receive aid if they know ZOA's Christian identity.

Several interviewees related the argument that ZOA's Christian identity should not influence the quality of projects to the earlier mentioned *humanitarian principles*. They consider these principles in selecting beneficiaries, cooperating with other actors, shaping a peacebuilding project, and expressing ZOA's Christian identity. They believe that they should not discriminate, for example by offering support only to specific religious groups. Moreover, these staff members think that expressing their faith is not neutral, especially because of their own power position towards beneficiaries. One interviewee argued that expressing personal faith could lead to

‘awkward’ situations, in which beneficiaries might feel uncomfortable because they do not share the same beliefs.

In relation to the former point, *transparency* was mentioned as an argument. One interviewee argued that ZOA needs to be transparent about its goals and not work in an area with a hidden agenda. Explicitly expressing its Christian identity is perceived as proselytizing, but this is not the goal of ZOA. If ZOA would not make a clear distinction between proselytization and relief work, this could lead to suspicions among communities and other humanitarian actors.

Nevertheless, despite this desire to stay neutral and not discriminate, multiple interviewees acknowledged that on a personal level, they would probably easier feel a *connection* with religious people in the field than secular people do, because faith serves as a common denominator. Especially, ZOA staff might feel a closer connection to Christians and Christian NGOs, because they have similar world views. This might in practice have influence on the organizational level as well. One participant acknowledged that on an international level, ZOA quite often turns out to partner in consortia with other Christian INGOs, because of the similar backgrounds, constituencies, ways of working and ideas on peacebuilding.

Moreover, despite the fact that ZOA staff emphasizes to not express their faith or spread the gospel in their activities, most participants feel that ZOA’s Christian identity is visible in its *commitment and way of working* in peacebuilding. For example, ZOA’s focus on interpersonal peacebuilding, with special attention on social cohesion and trust, is perceived as aligning to its Christian identity. Moreover, ZOA’s *inclusivity*, its inclusive selection of beneficiaries and effort to reach out to the most vulnerable is perceived as deriving from Christian values. Several interviewees have explained that this decision to not discriminate based on religious or other grounds results from the Christian values of loving one another and serving others.

The last form of influence mentioned by interviewees was the potential higher *sensitivity* of ZOA as a Christian organization to the contribution of religion and religious actors to peacebuilding. In strictly secular organizations, people might be less aware of this contribution, and also less willing to engage with religious actors. ZOA as a Christian NGO might therefore be less hesitant to cooperate with religious actors.

Together, these considerations show how ZOA staff not only makes informed decisions on its concrete activities, and the forms of cooperation it undertakes. Simultaneously, tendencies of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ work out on an ideological level. Based on reflections of its own identity

and its position within the humanitarian field, ZOA makes decisions on the way it presents itself, should express its own identity and thereby how aid should be provided.

Informed decisions on religion and cooperation

In sum, this chapter has shown that ZOA makes informed decisions on cooperation with other actors, religious actors, and the expression of its Christian identity. The decisions are based on ideas on good humanitarian aid, and several other factors deriving from the context. This process of making informed decisions is a reflection of the way that ZOA responds to tendencies of 'structure' and 'agency'. The next chapter will further reflect on the way that ZOA responds to those tendencies, and how that helps us to understand why religious peacebuilding is much more present in theory than in humanitarian practice.

Chapter V *Religious peacebuilding, structure and agency*

Up until now, we have discovered multiple things. The first chapter has addressed a gap between theoretical appreciation of religion and religious actors in peacebuilding on the one hand, and a lack of self-evident application of 'religious peacebuilding' in humanitarian practice on the other hand. Chapter II has explained that actors dynamically interact with each other in the humanitarian field based on informed decisions, as a result of tendencies of structure and agency. It argued that researching those informed decisions might help to better understand the gap of chapter I. Thereafter, two chapters discussed the results of my research at ZOA. Chapter III showed that ZOA's peacebuilding projects are focused on sustainable, interpersonal peacebuilding at grassroots level, in which local stakeholders are actively included. In these projects, cooperation occurs mainly with actors that present themselves as secular. Chapter IV in turn showed how ZOA's decisions to cooperate with actors are mainly based on strategic concerns, aimed to enhance projects' effectivity and sustainability. Although religion's relevance for peacebuilding is acknowledged, interviewees emphasize that cooperation with religious actors is not happening for their 'being religious'.

In this chapter, I want to bring all these parts together by discussing what ZOA's experiences tell us about the agency religious NGOs exercise in the humanitarian field. I will argue that the informed decisions ZOA makes, which are translated in concrete actions we perceive, show that religious NGOs do exercise agency. Simultaneously, however, ZOA's case shows that this agency is limited by the way that tendencies of 'structure' and 'agency' work out on an ideological level, relating to the ideas on the way that aid should be provided. Concretely, the case of ZOA displays two large assumptions on aid provision which can be conceptualized as 'blind spots' that do not necessarily correspond to aid receivers' reality. These blind spots are the result of tendencies of 'structure' and 'agency', of the way that humanitarian actors respond to each other and the social conventions in the secular field.

First, this chapter will elaborate on the way that tendencies of 'structure' and 'agency' work out in the case of ZOA. Thereafter, I will discuss the 'blind spots' visible in ZOA's experiences regarding religious needs and responses. Lastly, I elaborate on academic contributions on the existence of religious needs and responses.

Structure and agency in aid provision

As explained earlier, Giddens has argued that social life is constituted by the interaction of human beings, that make informed decisions on the social practices they engage in. In the case of ZOA, we can see how these tendencies operate in the humanitarian field. Although ZOA does not have officially formulated policy on the way it engages with religion and religious actors in peacebuilding, ZOA makes decisions on these matters which result in certain social practices. This shows that the religious NGO has a degree of agency, which it exercises within the humanitarian field.

The way that this agency is exercised is visible in concrete actions and decisions ZOA makes in aid provision. These namely show how ZOA can justify the practices it engages in. An example is the decision to cooperate with religious actors based on instrumental concerns, despite the fact that many interview participants explain to personally feel a stronger connection with Christian actors. This split between organizational and personal levels shows an informed decision, which is justified by varying arguments, like the importance of humanitarian principles, the influence of donors and the relevance of reputation. This shows how ZOA makes informed decisions based on reflexivity and knowledgeability. For the humanitarian field at large, this means that there are indeed dynamic interactions taking place, and that we cannot understand actors and their activities without linking them to each other.

Nevertheless, this degree of agency ZOA exercises is not absolute. ZOA's concrete decisions and social practices are a manifestation of a deeper, ideological level with ideas on how aid should be provided. When analyzing the interview results, we can see that ZOA's agency is limited on an ideological level in the form of certain assumptions or 'blind spots', which will be elaborated in the next section. These assumptions are not created independently, but in response to the context ZOA is part of.

Giddens has explained that the social practices people engage in, result in a constant production and reproduction of structure. This is what he called the repetitiveness of social practices, and the 'duality of structure'. In other words, every single activity an actor undertakes which conforms to predictable, existing patterns of activities, confirms and sustains that general pattern. This mechanism has influence on an ideological level, because the continuous confirmation of existing practices increases its justification. Social practices thus confirm certain assumptions, but simultaneously, these assumptions inform social practices. In this continuing process of

justification, certain assumptions can persist, even if they do not fully correspond to reality. This generates a situation in which actors' agency is limited, because their decisions are not fully based on what they personally would conceptualize as good, but are based as well on existing assumptions on how things should be.

For the humanitarian field, this means that reproducing commonly accepted forms of aid confirms existing conceptualizations of humanitarian assistance. On the one hand, this is enabling, because the predictability provides actors with trust to engage in these activities in the first place. The regularity of patterns provides an ontological security, a certain safety and reliability both for ZOA and for other engaged actors to act with agency. The projects that are implemented are based on a longer experience of ZOA and other actors, which provides a feeling of trust and enables ZOA to do projects and to justify them.

However, on the other hand, these confirmations are constraining, because they stimulate actors to act according to existing norms and patterns, and thereby hinder them to act in other ways. Deviations of existing patterns might namely result in sanctions, like reduced trust from donors or community members. As a result, these existing patterns generate 'blind spots' to other forms of humanitarian assistance that might be possible or even more valuable. In the next section, I will elaborate on the blind spots that are visible in ZOA's experiences.

Blind spots

Within ZOA's experiences, we can find two assumptions on how aid should be provided and what aid people need. Interview participants argued that ZOA is aimed to offer support based on communities' problems. Simultaneously, ZOA has mainly provided support that is aimed to respond to 'secular' or non-religious problems, in which religious ideas are not explicitly or deliberately addressed. Moreover, religious leaders have been included only instrumentally, because of their contribution to solving these non-religious problems.

This combination of argumentation and social practices shows the assumption that *non-religious problems ask for non-religious responses*. Although responding to community needs without addressing religion is a fair way of providing support, this does not exclude the potential value of religious responses to those problems. An example of a religious response to a problem that is not necessarily religious could be the way ZOA cooperated with religious leaders, who

mobilized Biblical principles to work on GBV. Another example is the inclusion of religious leaders to mediate in land rights problems. Religious responses might be as much valuable or effective, and perhaps even more appreciated by community members, than non-religious approaches. However, these religious responses have been exceptions to the secular norm of responding to community needs.

In addition, ZOA's argument to respond to communities' needs combined with its focus on non-religious problems, displays a perhaps even deeper assumption that *communities only have non-religious needs for peacebuilding to respond to*. Naturally, non-religious needs exist in communities and it is fair to respond to them. In addition, these kind of needs might be easier to detect, because they are more concrete. For example, a lack of livelihood provision in a female-headed household after a conflict is a rather concrete problem, and therefore relatively easy to find. Naturally, supporting this household with income generating activities is a fair way of responding. Nevertheless, the existence of these non-religious needs does not exclude a possibility that communities have religious needs as well.

These two assumptions can be related to the secular nature of the humanitarian field. As already addressed in chapter I, a false assumption exists in the Western world that secularity is neutral. This myth of secular neutrality creates a fear of not being neutral anymore when religion is included. Tapping into religion namely quickly feels as if people's own beliefs are not respected anymore, and that aid-providers force their religion onto their beneficiaries. Nevertheless, through these assumptions, humanitarian actors fail to recognize the religious needs that might be present in communities, and the potential value of religious responses to non-religious problems.

Furthermore, this thesis shows that these 'secular' ways of thinking are not only present in secular, but also in religious organizations. Because of ZOA's Christian identity and the fact that all interview participants were sensitive to the potential contribution of religion to peacebuilding, one could suspect the organization to be pro-active in engaging with religion in peacebuilding. However, interviewees perceived expressing religious ideas and deliberately cooperating with certain religious actors because of their religious background as inappropriate or even harmful. Many participants quickly linked questions on ZOA's Christian identity and cooperation with religious actors to proselytization. In such answers, interviewees strongly stated that ZOA is not a proselytizing organization, and that it should not at any moment discriminate based on religious background. In other words, as an NGO, ZOA should be neutral in providing aid, as according to

the humanitarian principles. This desire to stay neutral is translated as well in ZOA's decision to not present itself as a religious organization in their work in some contexts, and a desire to not let their religious identity influence their humanitarian work.

Nevertheless, I think it is a misunderstanding that responding to religious needs automatically means to proselytize or to force one's religion onto beneficiaries. What I mean with 'responding to religious needs' is to offer people the space to understand and respond to their problems in religious ways. Consequently, religious needs do not refer so much to convincing people to practice a specific faith, but to allow them to experience their religion, and to mobilize it to respond to their problems.

Because the case of ZOA shows that this awareness is lacking, even among religious organizations themselves, I argue that the lack of self-evident application of religion in peacebuilding on the ground does not lie so much in a lack of willingness to cooperate with religious actors or a lack of understanding of religion's relevance, but in a lack of sensitivity to the fact that aid receivers might have religious needs and might desire religious responses to their problems. Although knowledge on religion and its functioning within specific contexts could always be improved, interview participants did show a rather thorough understanding and awareness of the importance and ambivalence of religion. Moreover, most of them were very open as well to cooperation with religious actors. However, for some reason, this knowledge and attitude is not further translated into natural engagement of religion in peacebuilding.

Religious needs and academic research

This critique on a lack of sensitivity for religious needs and religious responses relates to critiques from several scholars on the ways that religion is approached in academic research. Jones and Petersen have argued that much literature on 'religion and development' are based on normative assumptions, which frame religious perspectives and practices as being apart from 'mainstream' development. It creates the idea that there is something as 'secular development' which is fundamentally different than 'religious development'.[72] In addition, Bartelink and Groeneweg have argued that research on religion in the field of development has mainly focused on the positive

[72] Jones and Petersen, "Instrumental, Narrow, Normative?," 1298-1300.

effects on development outcomes it produces, ignoring the religious dimensions of these works.[73] In other words, religion is not taken serious as much for itself, but is only approached instrumentally to the extent that it helps to attain 'secular' formulated development goals.

However, such 'secular' formulated development goals might not correspond to the way that aid receivers conceptualize responses to their problems. As mentioned in chapter I, religion is an important factor in coping with suffering, because it helps people to process experiences and give meaning to them.[74] Many interview participants acknowledged this relevance of religion for peacebuilding too, referring to religion's influence on people's worldviews and attitudes. Religion could thus positively contribute to processing traumatic events. However, in addition, it is important to acknowledge that many aid receivers understand and give meaning to their experiences in religious ways in most aspects of human life, not only in processing traumatic events.

The reliability of the existence of such religious needs can be found in examples of varying scholars. Ager and Ager discuss an example of a stakeholder meeting on a program on child protection in Darfur, in which humanitarian actors had not included any Islamic teachings. Local religious leaders that were consulted as stakeholders strongly emphasized their concerns on the relevance of including Qu'ran education to enable a proper upbringing of their children, which the humanitarian agency nonetheless refused.[75] Another example is given by Kidwai, who explains that Muslim refugees and IDPs frequently request to build mosques in refugee camps, so that they are able to pray communally. This indicates their religious needs, and a desire to have those recognized and met.[76]

Concludingly, looking at the role of religion in peacebuilding through the lens of 'structure' and 'agency' enables us to see that religious NGOs make informed decisions and thus exercise a certain degree of agency on the humanitarian field. However, it simultaneously shows that this degree is limited by the way that religious NGOs respond to their secular contexts, which is visible in the assumptions underneath the decisions. In ZOA's case, we saw this in the decisions to not proactively respond to potential religious needs and to include religious actors only strategically

[73] Brenda E. Bartelink and Ton Groeneweg, "Advocating the value-add of faith in a secular context: The case of the Knowledge Centre Religion and Development in the Netherlands," in *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75, nr. 4 (2019): 2, accessed July 7, 2021, DOI: 10.4102/hts.v75i4.5510.
[74] Walker et al., "The Role of Spirituality in Humanitarian Crisis Survival and Recovery," 119-124.
[75] Ager and Ager, *Faith, Secularism, and Humanitarian Engagement*, 2-3.
[76] Kidwai, "The Limits of Hospitality: Finding Space for Faith," 181.

for their contribution to secular approaches to peacebuilding. Nevertheless, it might be good for NGOs to seriously consider the existence of religious needs besides the non-religious needs they already respond to. By ignoring the religious dimensions peacebuilding might have for aid receivers, NGOs might fail to see how community members could have religious needs as well.

Conclusion

Concludingly, this thesis has contributed to debates on 'the religious' and 'the secular' in the humanitarian field by critically looking at the role of religion and religious actors in peacebuilding. After addressing a gap between theoretical appreciations of religion's relevance for peacebuilding and an absence of natural applications of this knowledge in humanitarian practice, this thesis showed that academic theory lacks a full understanding of this gap. I have tried to better understand the gap by looking at the problem through the lens of tendencies of 'structure' and 'agency'. Based on research within the religious NGO ZOA, I have argued that the lack of self-evident engagement with religious peacebuilding does not lie so much in a lack of willingness to cooperate with religious actors or a lack of understanding of religion as such, but in a lack of sensitivity to the fact that aid receivers might have religious needs and might desire religious responses to their problems. Although one would suspect this mainly among secular organizations, my research shows that also religious organizations lack this sensitivity.

Based on a critical literature review, a theoretical reflection on 'structure' and 'agency', and a research within ZOA consisting of both an inventory of peacebuilding projects and interviews with ZOA staff, this thesis has argued that religious actors and religion in general is often instrumentally approached in peacebuilding. In academic literature, an overemphasis can be found on the way that religion can positively contribute to secular development outcomes. Within ZOA, religious actors are not deliberately cooperated with from a policy point of view. However, in practice, cooperation frequently takes place with religious leaders, because they can meaningfully contribute to a project's effectiveness and sustainability. ZOA perceives such forms of cooperation as relevant, because it enables the organization to better respond to community needs. Religious actors are thus not cooperated with for the fact that they are religious, but because of their strategic added value to a project.

In this thesis, I have argued that the experiences of ZOA are based on informed decisions as a result of a dynamic between 'structure' and 'agency'. Based on a process of reflections on its own behavior, other actors' behavior and social conventions, ZOA engages in social practices, which simultaneously confirm and reproduce these conventions and behavior. Henceforth, the concrete social practices and informed decisions of ZOA show that religious NGOs do exercise a certain degree of agency within the humanitarian field. However, ZOA shows as well that this

degree is limited by the way that tendencies of 'structure' and 'agency' have influence on an ideological level, on the way ZOA conceptualizes good humanitarian assistance.

Specifically, I have argued that the continuous confirmation of existing 'structure' has the risk of generating blind spots in aid provision. In the case of ZOA, it has resulted in the assumption that responses to community problems need to be non-religious, and that only non-religious needs exist in communities to respond to in the first place. However, based on several academic contributions, I have argued that this assumption might not be true. Instead, it is perfectly reasonable that community members understand their own problems in religious ways, and that they desire religious responses to their problems. Therefore, by ignoring the religious dimensions problems might have for community members and by solely providing secular responses, actors in the humanitarian field might fundamentally misunderstand the people they try to serve.

Nevertheless, after these reflections, it remains debatable whether and which religious needs exist. Although this research has helped us to discover assumptions of aid givers, it has not been able to research among communities what they perceive as their needs and how they would like to respond to them. Therefore, it might be helpful to research this by looking for the ways in which community members conceptualize their needs. Moreover, it would be worthwhile to evaluate existing religious and non-religious responses among both community members and development practitioners. This evaluation should not only focus on the effectiveness of such approaches, but especially on the way they are appreciated.

In addition, it is important to reflect on the role of NGOs in these matters, and the way that development practitioners conceptualize their own role in peacebuilding. Even if religious needs exist, or if religious responses are desired by community members, it remains debatable whether NGOs should proactively respond to those needs and are suited for it. For example, the case of ZOA showed that various religious expressions, like praying during meetings, are happening already, despite the fact that ZOA does not deliberately encourages that itself. Henceforth, it is good to find out whether it would be helpful for people to increase the space for mobilizing religion to respond to their problems. The question at this point is thus not that much whether religious actors should be included, because that is happening on the ground already. Instead, a question to reflect on is how religious leaders can be included in ways that serve community members best and that respond to the way that *they* would like to see their problems solved.

Generally, this research has aimed to make us more aware of the important role that religion has in people's lives, and in the humanitarian field. It has shown that religion does play an important role, but that this role is contested and negotiated by a wide variety of actors and circumstances. The secular lens that many western scholars and development practitioners have, has blurred the awareness of these secular and religious dynamics playing in the field continuously. Religion is not an innocent phenomenon, and it is not helpful to create a myth that religion will always positively influence peacebuilding. On the other hand, the relevance of religion's role in peacebuilding might not be sufficiently acknowledged and appreciated at this moment. Therefore, I hope that we will continue researching this relevant topic, which will contribute to more insights among both academics and NGOs on the influence and potential role of religion in peacebuilding processes.

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Appendices

List of peacebuilding projects inventory

The inventory of ZOA's peacebuilding projects is based on the **project proposals** of the peacebuilding projects ZOA has implemented from 2017 until 2021. Moreover, the country level **Annual Reviews** for the years in which the country implemented peacebuilding projects have been used. The following list contains the project numbers and project names on which the inventory is based. Occasionally, if a project proposal was not present, other documents have been used, which is indicated with a reference for those specific projects.

Project number	Country	Project name
BDI1607	Burundi	USAID Land Ownership Agreement certificates
BDI1610	Burundi	Comités Amahoro II Rumonge
BDI1703	Burundi	Cohesion Sociale II
BDI1709	Burundi	Comités Amahoro III Rumonge
CDN1803	Myanmar	FOCO Land Rights Thandaunggyi
DRC1665	DRC	Adressing Root Causes of Conflicts/ARC Inawezekana Kalehe
DRC1830	DRC	Pamoja Tu Ji Inuwe "Relevons Nous Ensemble"
DRC1831	DRC	Change is necessary and possible at Kalehe littoral
DRC1985	DRC	CBST Complémentaire -Accompagnement des leaders pour la promotion du gen
DRC2004	DRC	Réduction des conflits fonciers et conflits liés à la transhumance au Sud-Kivu
ETH1508	Ethiopia	enhancing peace, stability and poverty reduction along the Ethiopia SS boarder
ETH1812	Ethiopia	WFP Gambella Improved livelihoods of host communities, IDPs and refugees
ETH1911	Ethiopia	SAS Gambella Integrated Crisis Recovery Response for refugees, IDPs & hosts
ETH20104	Ethiopia	EU Trust Fund Gambella - Health & Peacebuilding

ETH20270	Ethiopia	DW - Communications and community engagement Gambella
IRQ1817	Iraq	PVE-E
IRQ1822	Iraq	Safe Spaces and Livelihoods in Mosul
IRQ1824	Iraq	Hope for Mosul
IRQ1903[77]	Iraq	Community Based PSS
IRQ1909	Iraq	Social Cohesion in Mosul
IRQ1910	Iraq	UN Women - Community-led social cohesion and peace-building in Mosul
JSL1904	Jordan	Proper Transition for Community Centres, Jordan
LBR175	Liberia	LBR175 - FOCO - Peacebuilding Pilot
LBR180	Liberia	LBR180 - SIDA - CBS
LBR186[78]	Liberia	LBR186 - EU - Political Reconciliation Nimba
LBR189[79]	Liberia	LBR189 - CDRP - YMCA (USAID)
LBR192	Liberia	LBR192 - Irish Aid - Peacebuilding 2019 2020
LBR195	Liberia	LBR 195 - EIDHR - CBS and Talking Bus
LBR199	Liberia	UNPBF
LKA 408	Sri Lanka	Capacity building of Civil Society and Local Authorities to define development through sustainable livelihoods
LKA517	Sri Lanka	LKA 517 - Promotion of the conflict affected women through a redress of power imbalances in Kilinochchi & Mullaitivu: A holistic approach mobilizing the vulnerable and engaging the state to provide improved support
LKA709	Sri Lanka	LKA 709 - Empowering and mobilizing individuals, small groups and CSOs
LKA803	Sri Lanka	LKA 803 - Enabling Sri Lankan Churches and Communities to be Active Peace Makers

[77] For this project, no proposal was present. Therefore, I used a project summary document.
[78] For this project, no proposal was present. Therefore, I used a final report.
[79] For this project, no proposal was present. Therefore, I used a consultant evaluation report.

LKA809	Sri Lanka	LKA 809 - Integrating Psycho-social elements into routine SHG programs
MMR20094[80]	Myanmar	Building capacity of local leaders in South-East Myanmar
SDN1030	Sudan	Enhance Stability Through Community Resilience
SDN1041	Sudan	SIDA - Sustainable Integrated Development Approach
SDN1049	Sudan	Sustainable Peace and Resilience in Darfur
SDN1054[81]	Sudan	Peacebuilding in East and South Darfur - UNDP
SSD1765	South Sudan	Bor Civil Society Support Project
SSD1825	South Sudan	Baseline Study and Mapping in Larger Pibor, Boma State SouthSudan
SSD1830	South Sudan	Counselling of children, members of PTAs and teachers in the Yei area
SSD1916	South Sudan	Enhancing resilience of children in Yei
SSD2001	South Sudan	FSL and Peace Building - Pharus
SSD2102	South Sudan	Defend Her Rights – Championing Women Empowerment in Jonglei, South Sudan
SSD2104[82]	South Sudan	Peace Building in Pibor
UGD1724	Uganda	Securing Land for Sustainable Agri-business
UGD1731	Uganda	Securing Land for a Dignified Future
UGD1734	Uganda	Land Security and Economic Development Phase 2
UGD1812	Uganda	Grounded Legitimacy
UGD2003	Uganda	Pharus III Land
UGD2004	Uganda	GIZ Land

[80] For this project, no proposal was present. Therefore, I used a ‘Bestemmingsreserve’ and final report.
[81] For this project, no proposal was present. Therefore, I used a Responsible Party Agreement (RPA).
[82] For this project, no proposal was present. Therefore, I used a project planning document.

List of interview participants

For this thesis, I have conducted ten online interviews via Microsoft Teams. Nine of these interviews were conducted with current ZOA staff members, and one with a former ZOA staff member. Participants of the interviews work in varying functions and places, both at ZOA headquarters in the Netherlands, and in the following ZOA countries: Liberia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Uganda.

The following list contains an overview of the conducted interviews. Because of confidentiality, I have used abbreviations to indicate the participant's position in the organization. The definition of these abbreviations can be found at the bottom of this page. Further, the list contains the date at which the interview was conducted and the duration of the interview.

List of interview participants:

1. HQS, April, 21, 2021, 40 minutes.
2. CSE, April 21, 2021, 49 minutes.
3. HQS, April 22, 2021, 40 minutes.
4. CSN, April 22, 2021, 69 minutes.
5. CSE, April 28, 2021, 85 minutes.
6. HQS, April 29, 2021, 54 minutes.
7. CSN, April 30, 2021, 30 minutes.
8. CSN, May 5, 2021, 31 minutes.
9. CSE, May 5, 2021, 48 minutes.
10. CSN, May 7, 2021, 55 minutes.

Abbreviations:

HQS: Headquarter staff

CSE: Expat country staff (not coming from the country he or she is working in)

CSN: National country staff (coming from the country he or she is working in)

Interview guide

The following, general interview guide has been used in the interviews. Naturally, extra questions could be added or questions could be rephrased during the interview, based on the course of the conversation.

Information interview participant:

1. Can you tell me something about your position at ZOA and the way you have been engaged in ZOA's peacebuilding activities?
2. What is your own religious background?
3. What is your national background?

Engagement with local actors

4. Does ZOA often decide to cooperate with other actors in peacebuilding projects?
5. What local actors are typically included in the peacebuilding projects?
6. Why are these actors included? What factors do you take into account to decide to engage with an actor in peacebuilding projects?
7. What factors would make you hesitant to engage with an actor?

Engagement with religious actors

8. Has ZOA been cooperating with religious actors in peacebuilding projects?
9. Why did ZOA decide to engage / not engage with (these) religious actors?
10. Are there other religious actors with whom ZOA decides to not cooperate?
11. How are these decision to cooperate with religious and other actors made?
12. Is the inclusion of religious actors a topic that is consciously discussed within your ZOA office?
13. Do you think that the specific religion an actor represents, e.g. Christianity or Islam, matters for ZOA to cooperate with that actor?
14. Do you think that ZOA's identity as a Christian organization has influence on decisions to engage with religious actors or actors in general?

15. Do you think that ZOA's Christian identity has a meaning for of influence on the peacebuilding projects?
16. Many people in the contexts ZOA works are probably religious personally. Can you experience or perceive that in the projects?
17. Could you experience differences between projects in which actors that explicitly present themselves as religious are included, and projects in which those are not are included, considering the fact that many people in the contexts you work are religious themselves?

Concluding

18. Do you think that religion could have an added value for peacebuilding?
19. Can you imagine contexts in which it would not be a good to include religious actors?
20. Is there anything else you would like to discuss/add/mention relating to these topics?