Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change
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The Rise of Islamists to power in Egypt’s first post-revolutionary parliament surprised the secularist revolutionary forces which made this revolution possible in the first place. Such revolutionary forces not only undermined the role of religion in Egyptian society, but also failed to realise the deep impact of political Islam, especially on highly deprived poor communities. Based on grounded research conducted in two poor communities in Egypt (slum area in Cairo and Menia in Upper Egypt), we may conclude that religion was valued by poor communities much more than income, family and even jobs.

So far, the literature has commonly focused on two roles of religion: 1) its use by political forces for public mobilisation and perpetuation of unjust political and social structures; and 2) its danger as an ‘extreme force’ that can lead to fundamentalism, violence and social conflict. These two views, however, are highly biased and fail to provide a constructive view of how religion can be a catalyst for sustainable social change.

The aim of this article is, therefore, to unravel the developmental potential of religion and to demonstrate its role in facilitating collective human agency in poor Egyptian communities, and in enhancing grassroots-led social change. Rather than conventionally adopting a single faith-based organisation as a unit of analysis, I use an entire Egyptian village – Tafahna Al Ashraf village in Delta region – as an example. Through this case study, the article demonstrates how religion (in this case Islam) has been used as a moral filter to promote community development. The case study also shows how religion can be used not for political gains or social manipulation, but rather as a catalyst to encourage communal participation in

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local development, thus leading to a more sustainable bottom-up and culturally embedded model of human development.

To explain this model, the article explores the Islamic principles of wellbeing, social justice and responsibility, whereby religion can act as moral filter to reconcile individual and social interests. It then presents the case study of Tafahna village, in which a local leader used Islamic discourse to promote grassroots development. It explains how such religious discourse succeeded not only in enhancing the collective agency of local villagers, but also led to the establishment of various income-generating, educational and social care projects. The article concludes by pointing out the lessons learnt on how such a grassroots-led religiously inspired model of development can be scaled up to unfold the developmental potential of religion in post-revolutionary Egypt.

**Catalytic religion**

Can Islam – as a religion – act as a catalyst that promotes collective human agency? I argue that Islam can indeed play a crucial role as a moral filter in reconciling individual and communal interests, thus facilitating collective agency and fostering sustainable human development at the grassroots level. To identify such ‘developmental potential,’ there is a need however to distinguish between Islam as a religion and the practice of Islam. This is particularly important due to the increased misuse of religious slogans in politics and public mobilisation during elections. Islam, in particular, has been misused in patriarchal societies to justify and perpetuate existing cultural and social unjust structures that in reality do not have religious foundations, as some claim. This is, for example, the case with the *kholeh* law, which gives women the right to seek divorce and which had been rejected for a long period based on ‘religious’ grounds. Such misuse of Islam to maintain unequal power relations in traditional societies, and the reduction of religion merely to ‘political Islam,’ led to the growing number of fundamentalists and extremists who are increasingly intolerant to ‘others’ and sometimes can even justify the use of violence against those perceived as ‘others.’ The use of such divisive religious discourse leads to fragmented citizenship and poses clear threats to minorities, in Egypt particularly to the Copts.
Religion, however, does not have to be used politically, but instead has a huge developmental potential. The power of religion lies in its valuation by people. In a grounded study that I conducted in an urban slum area in Cairo and rural villages in Upper Egypt, people in poor communities were asked about what they value the most in life – and unsurprisingly, religion topped the list. Instead of being used and misused by politicians, Islam can be used as a moral filter that reconciles individual and communal interests. It has been repeatedly proven, that in contrast to the notion of the ‘invisible hand,’ individuals’ pursuit and maximisation of self-interests and the dynamics of market forces do not automatically lead to social benefits. This is where the role of religion as a moral filter comes in. It allows individuals to still pursue their self-interests, while enhancing their feelings of social responsibility and obligation to account for social goals and communal welfare. Such a moral filter tames the individuals’ self-interests by encouraging people to think about the Hereafter, by obliging them to pay Zakah for the needy, and by allowing them to undertake their economic activities without exploiting the needy or jeopardising social justice. Such ‘taming’ and ‘reconciling’ effect of religion as a moral filter is not a myth; it had been realised, for example, in the case of Tafahna Al Ashraf village in the Delta region in Egypt.

**Developmental Islam in Tafahna village**

In the early 1980s, the village with its 4,000 inhabitants suffered from lack of social services, illiteracy and unemployment. It only had one single primary school and no religious institutes, and was even ‘exporting’ the poorest casual labourers in the region. At present, the village is cited as a success story of local community development with various educational, productive and welfare projects. Led by a dedicated local leader, the local community sought to improve its livelihood sustainably by building educational skills, creating new job opportunities (especially for the youth in the village), and by caring for vulnerable and deprived social groups, such as orphans, widows, the elderly and female-headed households. The local leader used religious – Islamic – discourse to encourage other members of the local community to participate in the initiation and management of these various developmental projects. The villagers united
and believed in one idea, ie to translate their valued religious principles into actual developmental initiatives. They were not only morally pursuing ‘the good’ for themselves and their community, but they were also economically ‘getting their money back’ through new jobs and businesses, free education for their children, and improved social services. As a result, a number of religious institutes and faculties were established in the village. Social services were improved through the establishment of new roads and health care centres. Factories were also built to meet the increased demand for goods. Part of the profit from these factories was constantly pledged and reinvested in new local development projects to maintain the sustainability of these initiatives. New income-generating and employment opportunities were created, and a ‘multiplier effect’ set off as a result of the students’ influx into the village, and the growing local demand for goods and services.

By using religion as a moral filter, the villagers succeeded not only in reconciling their individual and communal goals, but also decreased their dependence on the state and enhanced their local communal ownership of their local development projects. Above all, religion was the catalyst for enhancing collective human agency in the village. Unfolding the developmental potential of religion led to the creation of various new collective capabilities that each individual alone would not have achieved, such as better education, income, jobs and business opportunities, as well as secured social assistance for the needy. This case study thus clearly demonstrates that Islam – not political Islam – but rather developmental Islam can be a major power to enhance sustainable human development at the grassroots-level.

The example of Tafahna village is not a one-off case, but instead is a religiously induced model to be followed and scaled up. The sustainability of this developmental model lies not only in its cultural embeddedness, but also in its dependence on the local mobilisation of financial and human resources, its emphasis on the developmental role of local leaders, and its enhancement of communal ownership. Religion, however, is an essential but insufficient element for sustaining such acts of collective agency. These acts still need to be institutionalised and well-governed
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to benefit the local community and to ensure the inclusion of deprived social groups. Islam – as a religion – is thus not only a powerful lubricant for collective agency, but also has a huge developmental potential that is still to be realised!

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