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Diaconia and Development: The Study of Religious Social Practice as Lead Discipline in the Religion and Development Debate

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Abstract: In this article, I argue that the research field of religion and development and diaconal studies, the study of Christian social practice, share a common subject of inquiry: the social impact of religion. The field of religion and development investigates this mainly with a focus on the Global South and within the discursive framework of the concept of development, while diaconal studies has thus far taken a Christian perspective and a historic focus on the Global North. Recent paradigm shifts in the development discourse (post-development critique, 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a global framework, critique of the secularist approach) put the field of religion and development under pressure to broaden its scope. Moreover, there is no clear lead discipline in the religion and development debate yet, raising questions about its disciplinary location in academic institutions and curricula. The field of diaconal studies is challenged by increasing religious pluralism and under pressure to consider perspectives from the Global South. Impulses from the recent advances in the conceptualisation of ecumenical diaconia as a new paradigm of Christian social service push the field to move beyond its historic focus on assistance and care. The aim of this article is to juxtapose these two fields of academic study and to bring them into mutual dialogue. The article reflects on both fields and their respective advantages and disadvantages and highlights areas of overlap. It goes on to propose a broadened discipline of diaconal studies, reshaped as the Study of Religious Social Practice, as a new academic field. The focus of this field would be the impact of religion on society in global perspective, across religious traditions and geographic contexts.

Keywords: religion; development; diaconal studies; diaconia; ecumenical diaconia; social work; transdisciplinarity; faith-based organisations

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1. Introduction

This article juxtaposes two fields of academic study: *religion and development* and *diaconal studies*. Religion and development emerged as a distinct field of research, policy, and practice over the past 20 or so years. It received its impetus from the "religious resurgence" (Hegland 1987a) and the consequent realisation that religion would not fade away in processes of modernisation and secularisation, but rather constitutes a relevant factor for processes of social change, development, and sustainability. A diverse range of actors, international organisations, governments, and development agencies has begun to systematically engage with the role of religion in international cooperation for development and humanitarian assistance, and a lively academic field has emerged that focuses on the nexus of religion and development (Öhlmann et al. 2022). The field is transdisciplinary in the sense that it encompasses contributions from a variety of academic and extra-academic perspectives. No clear lead discipline has emerged thus far, leaving the field hanging in the air in terms of its disciplinary location at universities and hindering its further institutionalisation outside one-off third-party-funded projects.

Diaconal studies, the study of Christian social practice, as an academic field emerged in the European context mainly in the second half of the 20th Century. It has its roots in the 19th Century diaconal movement (Nordstokke 2020), which led to the institutionalisation and professionalisation of church-based social care and services in the course of the 19th and into the 20th Century.[1] Emerging originally as a sub-discipline of protestant theology, the field has broadened and drawn on other disciplines such as management studies and social work, leading to a debate on whether diaconal studies can be considered a subdiscipline of theology or should be considered a transdisciplinary field of its own. The focus of diaconal studies has been mainly on the Global North, particularly Germany and the Scandinavian countries; only recently have perspectives from and on the Global South entered the field in a significant way. There have been recent conceptual advances regarding diaconia. A new framework of ecumenical diaconia has emerged, which provides important impulses to diaconal studies as the study of Christian social practice in a global perspective.

While religion and development and diaconal studies have thus far largely constituted separate discursive and academic fields, I argue that, essentially, both fields have the same object of inquiry: the social impact of religion. While the former field approaches this with a main perspective on the Global South through the conceptual lens of development, the latter focuses mainly on the contribution of churches to social services in Europe. Moreover, several current overlaps can be identified, for instance the intertwinedness of the religion and development and diaconia debates in the Global South, the relationship of the religious and the secular in religious social practice, their shared nature as fields of applied research marked by a close relationship with practice, and the debate on faith-based organisations. Both fields have their own distinct disadvantages and points of critique, in which they can mutually enrich each other.

I will, hence, propose that diaconal studies, further conceptualised and understood as the Study of Religious Social Practice, could constitute a lead discipline for the religion and development debate. It could provide a disciplinary home for the religion and development field, while at the same time broadening the scope of and internationalizing the current field of diaconal studies by taking into account the contemporary trends of religious pluralisation. At the same time, the field would cease to be confined by the development discourse and ensuing epistemic baggage. Its scope would be the investigation of the social impact of religion in global perspective.

My argument unfolds as follows in the remainder of this article: Section 2 engages with the field of religion and development, introducing the religious turn in the development debate, as well as a more long-term historical perspectives and commenting on key discursive shifts such as the post-development critique and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thereafter, Section 3 focuses on the concept of diaconia and the discipline of diaconal studies. It looks at diaconal studies' history and presents recent debates on diaconal studies as an academic discipline. One of the major conceptual advances in the field is the conceptualisation of the notion of ecumenical diaconia, as international Christian social practice in manifold forms. As a new paradigm, it provides the basis for a broadening of the field of diaconal studies and, in many ways, positions itself among the conceptual alternatives to development, at least in Christian contexts. This is the topic of the fourth section. Section 5 makes a step towards synthesizing both fields by identifying current overlaps. This is followed by Section 6, in which the argument for reshaping diaconal studies into the Study of Religious Social Practice is made. Lastly, the Conclusion (Section 7) provides a brief reflection on the scope of this disciplinary field and its distinction from other academic disciplines.

Lastly, a note on positionality is in order. I am writing this article as an academic, but my perspective is also informed by my personal perspective as a development/diaconia professional. I am a former staff member of the German church development agency Brot für die Welt, which forms part of the Protestant Agency for Diakonie (sic) and Development, where I was responsible for inter-church cooperation.

2. The Religious Turn in the Development Debate and the Emerging Field of Religion and Development

2.1. The Religious Turn

The role of religion in society and in processes of social transformation has gained continuously increasing attention in the past few decades. The global "religious resurgence", whose beginnings can be traced as far back as the 1978/1979 Iranian revolution (Hegland 1987a), has fundamentally altered long-standing assumptions about the occurrence of secularisation in processes of modernisation and development. This has eventually also led to a "turn to religion" (Tomalin 2015) in the development debate. The social impact of religion, for instance its role in the provision of social services, in facilitating processes of social change and transformation, its effect on economic development, its engagement for ecological sustainability, its consequences for gender equality, and its relationship with human rights, has gained the attention of academic research, as well as policymakers and development professionals around the globe.

Starting in the late 1990s, there has been steeply increasing interest on the part of multilateral organisations, governments, development agencies, and academia in the interrelation of religion and development. Whereas at the end of the 1990s, Kurt Ver Beek famously described "spirituality [as] a development taboo" (Ver Beek 2000), religion is now considered an important factor for development policy and practice.

Development policymakers and practitioners have recognised religion as a relevant factor (Tomalin 2015, 2020). Leading examples are initiatives by the World Bank (Belshaw et al. 2001; Bisca and Grun 2020), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (Holenstein 2009), the British Department for International Development (Deneulin and Rakodi 2011; Ter Haar 2011; Tomalin 2015), the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ 2016), and the United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development (United Nations 2019).[2] The recent engagement in analysing the relationship of development and religion is thereby not limited to (secular) governmental and multilateral institutions. Even religious organisations themselves seem to feel a need to conceptually engage with the role of religion for development, as illustrated by the examples of the Dutch Knowledge Centre Religion and Development founded by several religious development organisations (Bartelink and Groeneweg 2019), the Lutheran World Federation's 2013 volume *Religion: Help or Hindrance to Development* (Mtata 2013), and the 2016 special issue on religion and development of the World Council of Churches' *Ecumenical Review* (cf. Werner and van der Ven 2016).

At the same time and in close cross-fertilisation, an entire new field of research on religion and development has emerged (Swart and Nell 2016; Bompani 2019; Öhlmann et al. 2022),[3] as inter alia evidenced in the founding of the new journal *Religion & Development* (Öhlmann et al. 2022). The emergent research field is highly *inter*disciplinary, spanning across the entire humanities, social sciences, and religion and theology.[4] The field furthermore transgresses the boundaries of the academic space, as policymakers and practitioners jointly with academics play a key role in generating knowledge on religion and development. Religion and development can, hence, be considered a transdisciplinary field.

However, despite the dynamic of the field, thus far, no lead discipline emerged. The field has reached a crucial junction, where the question of its disciplinary location becomes relevant. While some scholars see the field of religion and development located within the realm of development studies (Bompani 2019), there are also good grounds to locate it in religious studies. In light of the existing contributions in the field, political science, sociology, anthropology, or regional studies could also lay legitimate claims to leading the debate on religion and development.

If it is to further develop and institutionalise, which discipline should take the lead in providing the institutional structures, for example the instalment of positions with a focus on religion and development? Through which disciplinary committees should grant proposals in the field go? Which subjects should students study to go into the field of religion and development, and importantly, in which field should young scholars

do their PhDs and postdoctoral qualifications to pursue an academic career in religion and development?

2.2. "Religious Communities Have Always Contributed to the Provision of Services for People"

Standing somewhat in contrast to the recent interest in the role of religion in processes of development stands the observation that religious social practice is not a recent phenomenon, but constitutes a vital part of many religious communities. As the German Federal Ministry of Economic Development points out in its 2016 strategy on the cooperation with religious actors: "religious communities have always contributed to the provision of services for people" (BMZ 2016, p. 4). Whether this statement holds in general ("always") can certainly be debated. However, the point is that religious social engagement is not a phenomenon that only emerged recently. Öhlmann et al. (2016, p. 10) observe that "as with many other religious communities, development is part of religion: That is, development from the churches' perspective is only one aspect in their transformation agenda, which aims at transforming and liberating the person and the community as physical, spiritual and social entities". Even though Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb's observation was made with a focus on a specific religious movement within African Christianity, the point made possesses validity across religious communities. Improving people's lives, caring for marginalised people and communities, providing social services, and facilitating social transformation have long been an important aspect in many religious communities, more often than not without explicitly framing this as "development". Hegland makes a similar point on a wider note with reference to the religious resurgence in Muslim, Christian, and Jewish contexts. She concluded that the religious movements emerging in the religious resurgence "are activist in nature, with a belief that redemption is attained through activity in this world, and with the goal of bringing about change in this world" (Hegland 1987b, p. 248). One case in point is the Lutheran World Federation's "Waking the Giant" Initiative (LWF n.d.), which is based on the assumption that churches are already in manifold ways working towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, but do not relate their work to them explicitly:

> With their vocation to serve, churches have for centuries engaged in promoting dignity and justice, particularly among those oppressed, forgotten or pushed to the margins. Many churches have established themselves as important actors in the provision of social and development services and as advocates for global human values, such as gender equality, peace and justice. They distinguish themselves through the permanence of their presence, an often high level of credibility and a wide reach at community level, including to the remotest areas where state institutions may be absent. Despite the strong work being carried out by churches in relation to individual SDGs, many of them are not familiar with UN processes and the language of the 'Agenda 2030'. (LWF n.d.)

2.3. The Long History of Religion and Development

Consequently, recent contributions to the religion and development debate have pointed to what could be called the long history of religion and development, i.e., the historical antecedents of the contemporary religion and development debate. While much of the literature in the religion and development debate situates the origins of religion and development in the religious turn towards the end of the 20th Century, recent research has complemented this by pointing to the longer history of religion and development (Haustein 2020). Spies (2021, p. 11) points out that "religious positions . . . were closely intertwined with questions of 'development' in the Christian mission of the 19th century" (translation by the author). There are historical interconnections and continuities between modern development work, colonialism, and Christian mission in the 19th and first half of the 20th Centuries. In international development cooperation in its modern form beginning after the second world war, the influences of colonial world views of the 19th Century are visible, particularly of the notion of a "Christian civilizing mission" of church mission

actors, which emerged in the context of a reciprocal relationship with political colonialism (Öhlmann, forthcoming; Spies 2021, pp. 18–20; see also the extensive recent monograph by Hölzl 2021).

Tomalin (2018) provides a helpful framework by systematizing three "phases of engagement between religions and global development institutions". The first phase is the "pre-secular" or "integrated phase" during the colonial period in the 19th Century and leading up to the Second World War. During this phase, Tomalin identifies a close link between religion and poverty reduction. This was followed by a "secular" or "fragmented" phase post-World War II "founded on the normative secularist position that modernisation will and indeed should lead to secularization" (Tomalin 2018, p. 1). The religious turn in the development debate, emerging around the turn of the 20th to the 21st Century, can, hence, be seen as a third phase in the relationship of religion and development and the debate thereupon.

2.4. Post-Development Critique

Relating to their problematic historical roots, development policy, development practice, and the very notion of development have increasingly come under attack in the context of the post-development and post-colonial debates (Mbembe 2001; Mignolo 2011; Escobar 2012; Ziai 2016), with some calling for the abandonment of the term development, as well as international development cooperation altogether. Öhlmann et al. (2022, p. 5) consider this critique a fundamental reconfiguration of the development space:

> The post-development debate has criticised development's modernisation-theory-influenced universalism of implying Western economic models and social structures as the normative basis and ends of the transformation of non-Western societies. It has pointed to the hierarchies created by development discourse, policy and practice: between a Western, desirably developed centre and an underdeveloped periphery . . . The post-development debate has hence fundamentally challenged the term, the concept and the practice of development, called for its abandonment and brought to the fore alternative and pluriversal normative notions of society and economy (cf. Kothari et al. 2019). . . . Many of these notions and concepts have religious origins, religious connotations or make reference to religious worldviews, beliefs and practices. Kothari et al.'s recent post-development dictionary (Kothari et al. 2019), for example, mentions several such religious concepts in the framework of its pluriversal approach, from "Liberation Theology" and "Christian Eco-Theology" to "Islamic Ethics" and "Buddhism and Wisdom-based Compassion". Notions of development (understood in a broad sense) in religious communities or alternative normative concepts of society, economy, ecology etc. emerging from religious communities often stand in contrast to and challenge conventional development thinking's inherent secularism (cf. Bowers Du Toit 2019). (Öhlmann et al. 2022, p. 5)

It is such notions that inform and undergird religious communities' social practice, and not necessarily notions of development. The study of religious communities' contributions to contemporary development paradigms such as the SDGs should, hence, be placed in a wider context and include the Study of Religious Social Practice, without restricting this to the oftentimes also problematic term of development or limiting it to contemporarily dominant global notions such as the Sustainable Development Goals. The question should not necessarily be "how do religious communities contribute to development", but how do they contribute to society and social transformation? Thereby, it should also be noted that such contributions cannot always be considered positive (leaving aside the not unimportant question of what actually constitutes a positive contribution to society). Religion's impact on society is neither a priori positive nor a priori negative. However, the first question should not be whether it is good or bad (if such normative questions are to be asked in academic research at all), but how religion impacts society—in the broad sense this question opens.

2.5. The Sustainable Development Goals as Global Paradigm Shift

The religious turn in the development debate, furthermore, takes place in a global policy context marked by a decisive shift, the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations 2015) as a global development policy framework with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. One important innovation of the 2030 Agenda is certainly the merger of the development and the sustainability debates and the consequent core position ecological sustainability now occupies in the SDGs. However, another crucial point is implicit in the 2030 Agenda: "the SDGs are not just for 'developing' countries but for all nations" (Leer-Helgesen 2018, p. 149). In the same vein, Schnabel (2018) points out:

> The major paradigm shift that the adoption of these goals represents lies in no longer dividing the world into groups based on unilateral standards of technical-industrial and financial-economic development, where some are supposed to reach the level of development of the others .... Instead, areas are identified where humanity as a whole requires further development, and where the respective developmental needs partly cut across the traditional classification of industrialised countries and developing countries. ... Classical development issues such as education, poverty, and health are undoubtedly urgent in many countries of the global South, but they are also recognised as persistent and sometimes growing challenges in the global North. (Schnabel 2018, p. 188, translation by the author)

Öhlmann et al. (2022, p. 3) elaborate further:

> Development ceased to be an affair of so-called "developing countries" in the Global South, which, in old-school development thinking, needed to develop themselves or even "be developed" to reach Western levels. It is clear that the challenges of the (post-)crisis age, such as climate change, global health, increasing inequalities, conflicts and shrinking spaces for civil society, just to name a few, are not unique to specific contexts but necessitate action across the globe. Consequently, development under the conditions of comprehensive sustainability as outlined in the 2030 Agenda refers to all countries of the world. The core assumption underpinning the SDGs is that all countries and societies must undergo profound transformations in at least part of the realms delineated in the Agenda. (Öhlmann et al. 2022, p. 3)

3. Diaconia and Diaconal Studies

3.1. The Object of Diaconal Studies: Diaconia

Above, the point was made that many religious communities have for a long time been engaged in the care for the marginalised and the transformation of society. In the Protestant Christian tradition, one important concept undergirding and describing churches' social work is the concept of diaconia. Originating in the New Testament, the term was coined in the context of 19th Century Germany to describe churches' social practice, especially their care for the poor and the marginalised in the context of the fundamental inequalities and social rifts brought about by industrialisation in 19th Century Western Europe (Nordstokke 2020). The term diaconia was used almost exclusively in reference to domestic affairs until the middle of the 20th Century. Diaconia was part of what was considered "Inner Mission", i.e., service by the church and Christians within the national borders (Seitz 2016, p. 325). International Mission in foreign countries was not included in the discursive or organisational context of diaconia, even though this work encompassed similar elements, for example in the health care and education sectors (WCC and ACT Alliance 2022, pp. 26–27). After World War II, the term diaconia started to become more relevant in international ecclesiastic cooperation and the global ecumenical movement (Werner 1993). However, Leer-Helgesen (2018, p. 150) argues that "until the 1980s and 1990s *diakonia* (sic) was mainly understood as humble and silent service, or charity". I would posit here that, in terms of the public perception of diaconia in Europe, this is to a large extent still the dominant

perception. In my experience working in a Christian development agency in Germany, this is also the dominant perception of diaconia in Christian development work.

In recent decades, however, comprehensive conceptualisations of diaconia have been developed in the context of the global ecumenical movement, which go far beyond earlier assistencialistic paradigms (see, for example, Ampony et al. 2021; Nordstokke 2020; Phiri and Kim 2014; WCC and ACT Alliance 2022; Werner 2023). This has led to a substantial broadening of the understanding of diaconia as ecumenical diaconia and is, in my view, a major conceptual advancement in global Christian social practice. Furthermore, as will be argued below, the conceptualisation of ecumenical diaconia has both positioned it in proximity to the religion and development debate and even positioned it as an alternative to development.

However, one has to note that, despite its continued relevance in some European countries and its recent prominence in the ecumenical movement, the term diaconia is not universally employed. As Nordstokke points out, the term diaconia as such is predominantly relevant in the context of "Germany and the Nordic countries, [where] 'diakonia' has become a quite known word due to the work of numerous diaconal institutions over the last 150 years" (Nordstokke 2020, p. 172). "'Diakonia' is not often used in the Anglo-American theological language, for that reason some seminaries may use other words for the same area of study, such as 'social ministry'" (Nordstokke 2020, p. 172). Nordstokke points to the example of the Asian context, stating that "the concept of 'diakonia' may not belong to the vernacular of most Asian churches; instead they more frequently use terms as 'social ministry' or 'social action' when referring to their involvement in this kind of work" (Nordstokke 2020, p. 171). Similar observations could be made for the African context and even more so for churches beyond the ecumenical movement. For instance, the Nigerian Redeemed Christian Church of God has coined the term Christian Social Responsibility for its social work (Adeboye 2020) and the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost uses the term social services (Anim 2020).[5]

3.2. Diaconal Studies: The Study of Christian Social Practice

The emergence of diaconia and the professionalisation of diaconal services in Germany and the Nordic countries led to the emergence of the discipline of diaconal studies, first as a subdiscipline of practical theology, but later with a more independent and interdisciplinary profile as an academic field. With a general understanding as the "reflection on diaconal practice" and "theory of diaconal practice" (Eidt and Eurich 2016, pp. 349, 355, translation by the author), diaconal studies can be found at universities (for example, the Institute for the Study of Diaconia at Heidelberg University's Faculty of Theology), but significantly also at specialised universities or universities of applied sciences, illustrating the close connection to practice (Noller 2016). The current main focus of this discipline is the church and its practice in the social space. As Eidt and Eurich (2016, p. 348) point out, "the academic reflection of diaconal practice enables diaconal actors such as the church at the congregational level and its diaconal institutions and organizations to remain capable to speak and act in societal processes of change" (translation by the author). The focus of diaconal studies as a discipline is thereby in most instances on the domestic context, to some extent certainly because of the historically domestic focus of diaconia as such.

There is a general consensus on the interdisciplinary nature of diaconal studies. The literature agrees that diaconal studies has to draw on several disciplines. What is not clear is its relationship with theology (Eidt and Eurich 2016, p. 353). According to Hofmann (2016, p. 363), there are two positions on the nature of diaconal studies, delimited by the core question:

> Is theology the primary reference science for the diaconal studies [position I], or is it one of several reference sciences that, through dialogue or trialogue, investigate social phenomena together [position II]? Representatives of the first position highlight the interdisciplinary nature, for example, of practical theology and insist on the inherent connection between diaconal studies and theology,

> as losing this connection would compromise its diaconal character. Theology is assigned a steering and normative function in this context. Representatives of other positions aim to have a more open relationship and understand the connection between diaconal studies and theology not in normative terms, but from a phenomenological perspective: Diaconia is a phenomenon that manifests itself in connection with religion and its institutionalised forms. To comprehend it, various reference sciences are necessary. In this regard, theology does not have a central steering function. (Hofmann 2016, p. 363, translation by the author)

An example of a proponent of the first position is Nordstokke, who identifies two complementary "approaches in the academic study of diaconia. One starts with diaconal praxis, activities commonly named diakonia . . . The other approach starts with the concept 'diakonia' and studies it in its biblical and theological meaning" (Nordstokke 2020, p. 173). The importance of theology as the main reference discipline immediately stands out from this quote. Moreover, Nordstokke naturally assumes the position of diaconal studies at theological faculties and institutions (Nordstokke 2020, p. 183). In a similar vein, Noller (2016, p. 384) considers diaconal studies as a theological subdiscipline: "diaconal studies as theological discipline is based on a theology of diaconia". Consequently, a core task of diaconal studies is the reflection of social challenges in light of theological tenets.

While there seems to be large agreement between the two positions that, historically, diaconal studies was closely related to theology as the core reference and foundational discipline, proponents of Hofmann's Position II argue that, due to processes of secularisation, religious de-institutionalisation, and religious pluralisation, diaconal studies needs to rethink its purpose and scope. Sigrist (2016) argues that, in light of religious and social change, the nature of diaconal practice has changed to such an extent that theology can no longer be considered a lead discipline in the field:

> Even today, in discourses related to diaconal studies as well as in diaconal institutions, the idea persists that theology distinguishes itself in diaconia and diaconal studies by playing the role of a 'lead discipline.' . . . However, scientific diaconal reflection lost this role due to the processes of change within the leadership and caregivers of diaconal institutions, where theologians are no longer automatically elected to lead these organisations, and many caregivers at the bedside no longer belong to a Christian denomination. The deinstitutionalisation of religion goes hand in hand with the deconfessionalisation of diaconia, which has significant implications for the theoretical reflection of diaconia and has recently been summarised as follows: 'It seems necessary to understand diaconal science as an interdisciplinary field of research where different disciplines (social work, nursing, medicine, pedagogy, economics, psychology, theology, etc.) can come together to contribute their perspectives and professional expertise' [Rügger/Sigrist, 162] . . . Theology becomes a 'reference discipline' among many others for diaconal studies—not less, but also not more. (Sigrist 2016, p. 370, translation by the author)

Similarly, in his 2012 article "Religion between the private and the public—about diaconal studies as an academic field", Bäckström calls for the field of diaconal studies to engage in a wide scope, arguing that "diaconal research" should study "religion as a resource between individuals and society" and would thereby be "capable of making a constructive contribution to the rapidly growing research in this area from the perspective of social and religious studies" (Bäckström 2012, p. 44).

Contemporary religion, in Bäckström's view,

> is not only found in the private social sphere. Instead, religious organizations and phenomena appear in both the private and the public sphere at the same time . . . Religion, in practice, appears in different ways in different sectors of society and is assigned different roles that transcend the distinction between the private and the public. (Bäckström 2012, pp. 54–55)

The changing role of religion in society raises numerous new questions for research, as Bäckström points out: "There is a growing need for research on the tension between quality-based private sphere, where the health and welfare of the individual is central, and society's need for public welfare institutions" (Bäckström 2012, p. 55). Significantly, Bäckström does not restrict the scope of diaconal studies to the Christian (or even mainline protestant) sphere. Without thematizing this explicitly, he positions diaconal studies as the study of religious engagement in society. This move seems to be inter alia motivated by the increasing religious pluralism in Europe and across the globe and is a consequent step to react to it.

4. Drawing on Ecumenical Diaconia as a New Paradigm for Diaconal Studies

4.1. Ecumenical Diaconia

Internationally, the field of diaconal studies has seen substantial advancement with respect to the conceptualisation of diaconia. The debate on diaconia has been particularly dynamic in the context of the global ecumenical movement.[6] The World Council of Churches, ACT Alliance, and the Lutheran World Federation have been key facilitators of this debate, to which a number of scholars from around the globe have contributed and are continuing to contribute (Klaasen 2020). Phiri and Kim, as senior WCC officials and two of the key figures in these debates, provide an understanding of ecumenical diaconia that branches out and further conceptualises diaconia's historical scope on the care for the poor and marginalised (Phiri and Kim 2014). According to them, diaconia can be understood according to three dimensions: first, as social and caritative service, second, in the sense of a transformative or prophetic diaconia as advocacy for justice and peace, and third, as care for creation. The first dimension relates to the historic mandate diaconia as care for the poor and marginalised. The second dimension relates to a more structural approach, aiming at transforming the social, economic, and political structures of society. The third dimension moves beyond humanity and underlines the responsibility for the environment as divine creation.

Several authors have, furthermore, stressed the aspects of empowerment and transformation in the context of ecumenical diaconia. Examples are Carlos' Hams monograph *Empowering Diakonia* (Ham 2015), which heavily draws on the conceptual apparatus of empowerment, or the contributions by Ignatius Swart and Nadine Bowers-Du Toit calling for a transformational and political approach to diaconia (Swart 2013; Bowers-Du Toit 2016) along the lines of Phiri and Kim's second dimension.

Chung (2014) emphasises the role of diaconia for economic justice, which relates to Phiri and Kim's second dimension. However, Chung relates diaconia to the critique of neoliberalism and the post-colonial debate, calling for a "post-colonial reorientation to diakonia and economic justice" (Chung 2014, p. 309):

> The post-colonial perspective seeks to debunk a logic of possessive individualism as adhesion to politics of neo-colonization and neo-racism. This entails a comprehensive critique of the Western notion of modernity and developmental projects for the sake of an alternative trans-modernity. . . . A prophetic diakonia is articulated in a political economic realm. Diakonia must tackle the cause of political and economic evil at the social and cultural roots. It takes into account economic classes, their conflicting interests and ideologies, and social divisions. Church action of the diakonia is driven by prophetic action and advocacy for emancipation and solidarity in awareness of the signs of the times. A prophetic and emancipatory diakonia struggles to remove social problems of neo-racism and neo-colonialism by engaging the liberating word of God. . . . Post-colonial theory challenges the cultural and economic legacy and aftermath of colonialism, which continues in previously colonised countries. It helps us to identify a hidden regime of power and dominion and guide a new strategy of resistance in counter hegemony against the neocolonial reality of the empire ensuing in the aftermath of colonialism. (Chung 2014, pp. 305, 308–9)

Chung's more radical approach to transformational diaconia, which takes up various elements of post-colonial critique, illustrates ecumenical diaconia's ability to connect to the post-colonial and post-development debates.

A recent milestone in the ecumenical discourse on diaconia building on the notion of ecumenical diaconia is the joint publication by the World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance *Called to Transformation—Ecumenical Diakonia* (WCC and ACT Alliance 2022). In much the same vein as Phiri and Kim (2014), the document argues that "diaconal action cannot be limited to being remedial; it must also be preventive and creative. It must encompass service to the needy, advocacy by speaking to power, and service and advocacy about creation" (WCC and ACT Alliance 2022, p. 41) and, subsequently, summarises the breadth of diaconia as follows:

> Social *diakonia* (sic) as individual acts of care, healing and reconciliation in a local church or community; *diakonia* as institutionalized assistance for marginalized groups and those suffering, by churches or specialized diaconal agencies; *diakonia* as community work and empowerment for strengthening conviviality; political or transformative *diakonia* comprising of (sic) efforts to transform living conditions and political frameworks contributing to injustice and conflicts, addressing the whole of society in advocacy and lobbying work on behalf of those suffering; prophetical *diakonia* addressing misbalances of power, access and participation in societies, speaking truth to power, denouncing structural injustices; [and] ecological *diakonia* addressing fundamental issues of the protection of the environment and of climate justice. (WCC and ACT Alliance 2022, pp. 49–50)

In his contribution to this Special Issue, Werner (2023, p. 15) puts the significance of the WCC/ACT Alliance document in perspective:

> It presents a new step in the development of ecumenical diaconia because it abandons the individualistic concept of diaconia as individual acts of mercy and seeks ways to help people in need, which is characteristic of all churches, though diverse in shape and context. The transformative potential of social and ecological diaconia should be much more intentionally realized by churches, development agencies, and national governments. (Werner 2023, p. 15)

4.2. Ecumenical Diaconia as (Post-)Development Alternative

This new understanding of ecumenical diaconia was substantially influenced by the development debate and its emphasis on change and transformation (Leer-Helgesen 2018, p. 150). This is also highlighted in the WCC/ACT Alliance document: "The new paradigm of ecumenical diakonia that was now emerging drew learning from the secular discussion on development, as well as from theological reflection on the distinct nature of diaconal action" (WCC and ACT Alliance 2022, p. 31).

However, the concept of ecumenical diaconia has the potential to move beyond the dominant development paradigms and position itself as one of the core concepts in the pluralistic concert of development alternatives. Ecumenical diaconia, in Leer-Helgesen's (2018) view, offers the possibility to include "'alternative' discourses" and subaltern perspectives vis-à-vis the SDGs as a contemporary mainstream development paradigm. This concerns, for instance, contextual notions of and alternatives to development, a more rigorous focus on decreasing inequalities, and the inclusion of currently marginalised perspectives of those "whose discourses are *not* included in the SDGs" (p. 154, emphasis original). As Leer-Helgesen (2018, p. 156) points out, diaconia "asks how the SDGs would look from the global South. In the process of translating the discourse into praxis, diaconal actors must ask how the most marginalised in developing countries will benefit".

Moreover, ecumenical diaconia allows for the inclusion of a crucial aspect receiving little attention in the SDGs, the necessity for reducing consumption, particularly in the Global North[7] and the redistribution of resources (Leer-Helgesen 2018, p. 158). Lastly,

Leer-Helgesen points to the issue of power. The SDGs, she argues, do not address power relations adequately:

> The power of defining the discourse of mainstream development in the future has been challenged by social movements (traditionally "subaltern"), even though traditionally strong international actors (traditionally "principals") still dominate. . . . A change in power relations is fundamental for justice. Despite power structures underlying questions of global development, the SDGs fall short in making power relations an explicit question. (Leer-Helgesen 2018, p. 159)

Hence, the critique of power relations and the dismantling of unequal power structures becomes an important dimension of ecumenical diaconia:

> Diaconal analysis must include a critical power analysis of all relations and contexts. . . . Abuse of power and unjust power structures are root causes for injustice. Transformation of our world cannot happen without challenging power structures. From a diaconal perspective, a process of transformation includes a transformation of all involved. (Leer-Helgesen 2018, p. 160)

Thus, while the discourse on ecumenical diaconia has been strongly influenced by the development discourse, in particular the SDGs, ecumenical diaconia has the potential to move beyond them:

> [While] the SDGs offer opportunities for a rethinking of *diakonia* and its praxis . . . diaconal actors should be critical and attentive toward the process of the SDGs in the process of implementation. Attention to how things are done must include a power perspective, and goals and targets must be interpreted 'from the margins.' Transformation depends on changed relations of power, fundamental for justice. (Leer-Helgesen 2018, p. 161)

Following similar lines of thought, also, Werner (2023) calls for ecumenical diaconia to move beyond secular development paradigms, such as the SDGs:

> Churches are not just trapped and confined within the predominant discourse patterns of state development cooperation or the SDG agenda . . . Churches are empowered and called to ask critical questions beyond the current national economic paradigm, even beyond the current SDG development framework concept and its assumptions on growth and progress: Do we have a really convincing new mega-narrative to be shared with populations that makes the imperative attractive for all to seek for a new balance between reducing our resources' depletion from this Earth and the needs to correct the huge global economic inequalities that still mark this world? (Werner 2023, p. 8)

5. Common Discursive Fields

The preceding sections have introduced religion and development as a transdisciplinary field, covering its current state, its emergence and key current issues, and likewise, the emergence and key issues in the discipline of diaconal studies as the study of Christian social practice. Moreover, the preceding section introduced the conceptual advances made in the debate on ecumenical diaconia, which provide the basis of a broadened understanding of development studies. On this basis, Section 5 will now turn to identifying areas of overlap of both fields, with the intention of illustrating their proximity.

5.1. The Secular–Religious Dichotomy as a Common Point of Contention

Both fields, diaconal studies in its current form and religion and development, share a common field of tension, which could be broadly termed the relationship of the religious and the secular. In the study of diaconia, this relates to the question of the uniqueness of diaconal services and the religious identity of diaconia: What is Christian in the church's social services? This question has become relevant in the context of two major trends in European societies. First, in the liberalised regulatory environments of the welfare

state in which different (religious and non-religious) social service providers compete, diaconal services have to operate and compete according to market standards (Palier 2010; Eurich and Maaser 2013). As Eidt and Eurich (2016, pp. 360–61) note: "Under conditions of competition, economic criteria have now often become the dominant steering criteria of diaconal practice, which has raised the fundamental question of the Christian self-understanding of diaconal institutions".

The second trend is the already-mentioned deconfessionalisation and religious pluralisation in many European countries (cf. Jähnichen et al. 2015). Sigrist (2016, pp. 366–67) speaks of a "divergence of aid and religion . . . Impulses, motivations, justifications, and initiatives for providing assistance and solidarity to people in need are less and less explicitly and directly coming from the Christian environment" (translation by the author). The commitment to engage in social services does not come from a religious imperative, but is rather motivated by "the realisation that one simply has to help". Sigrist, hence, argues that "because of the megatrend of deconfessionalisation the diaconal mandate of the churches is put under pressure" (2016, p. 370, translation by the author). This leads to the question: What does it mean for religious social services to act in contexts that are marked by secularism and religious plurality? In what ways can and should religious social practice employ (or not employ) its religious identity and supposed "added value" if it seeks to maintain a "cultural coherence" (Sigrist 2016, p. 376, referring to Jörns) with the society it is embedded in?

The secular–religious divide has been an important theme in the literature on religion and development as well. In this discursive context, the question of cultural coherence has thus far often arisen inversely. How can secular development work be culturally coherent in religious contexts? What is the unique contribution of religion, and how can a supposed "added value" of religion in development practice be realised? Important contributions to this debate are Deneulin and Bano's (2009) volume *Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script* and Carbonnier, Kartas, and Silva's collection *International Development Policy: Religion and Development* (Carbonnier et al. 2013), as well as the articles by van Wensveen (2011) and Jones and Petersen (2011), cf. Öhlmann et al. (2020a, pp. 1–4). One core argument in this debate is that the recent turn to religion in development policy and practice has followed an instrumentalizing approach (Jones and Petersen 2011), intending to harness religious communities and organisations for the implementation of (Western, secular) development agendas. van Wensveen (2011) terms this an "additive pattern", which stands in contrast with an "integrative pattern", "in which religion does not function as an instrument for secular development goals, but in which religious communities set the agenda bringing to the table their own religious-inspired concepts and practices of sustainable development" (Öhlmann et al. 2020a, p. 2).

The secular–religious tension also surfaces in church-based international development cooperation in the form of debates on the relationship between mission and development (see, for example, Gühne 2019; Öhlmann et al. 2020a; Öhlmann, forthcoming; WCC and ACT Alliance 2022; Werner and Gühne 2018; Znoj and Zurschmitten 2019), as well as in the debate on faith and professionalism in the context of humanitarian work (Steinke 2017, 2020; Wilkinson 2020). It also surfaces in the WCC/ACT Alliance document on ecumenical diaconia, which, on the one hand, acknowledges the integrity of "*Diakonia* and evangelism," as "the spiritual dimension of development is as important as the social or material dimension" (WCC and ACT Alliance 2022, p. 40), while, on the other hand, religion is relegated to the level of mere motivation for diaconal action ("What is distinct for diaconal actors is that they refer to religious concepts, in addition to secular, when explaining their action and its objective", WCC and ACT Alliance 2022, p. 68), and it remains unclear how diaconia is conceived of to be qualitatively different from non-religious social practice.

5.2. The Debate on Faith-Based Organisations

Another area of overlap of the current discourses of development studies and religion and development is the lively, but thus far inconclusive, debate on the nature and identity

of faith-based organisations (FBOs) (for example: Haugen 2019; van der Merwe et al. 2014; Maes et al. 2023). In their recent comprehensive scoping review of the literature on faith-based organisations, Maes et al. (2023, p. 211) conclude that "the field of faith-based organizations is simply too complex and diverse to allow the construction of an overarching typology". The secular–religious tension is already visible in the term faith-based organisation itself. By calling organisations faith-*based* (as, for example, opposed to religious organisations), a distinction is presupposed between the religious foundation and motivation of the organisation and the practice of the organisation. This constitutes a discursive secularisation of religious actors (cf. Öhlmann et al. 2020b). They are not considered religious actors as such, but their religious identity is compartmentalised as their motivation, with the intention, as I would argue, to make their work coherent to secular discursive contexts such as secular states or the global development debate. Tomalin (2020) in her actor-centred approach makes a similar argument. She describes international FBOs as mediators between a local, religious discursive context in the Global South and a global, secular discursive context of the international development discourse.

5.3. Applied Research and Practice Connection as a Commonality

The two fields, furthermore, have in common that they are marked by a close connection to policy and practice. Unlike other academic fields, neither the field of religion and development nor diaconia as the study of Christian social practice in its current form are conceivable without their respective close connection to actors outside academia—be it development policymakers and practitioners wanting to include religious communities in development work, be it religious communities and organisations in the Global South active in social services, diaconia, and development, or be it large-scale diaconal organisations in the Global North as large-scale implementers of social welfare in Europe, just to name a few examples. Consequently, the interest in both fields is not purely analytical. Rather, both the diaconal studies and the study of religion and development engage with fundamental societal questions. Both fields are, therefore, transdisciplinary, in the sense outlined by Jahn et al. (2012). The genuinely transdisciplinary nature characterised by the close collaboration with extra-academic actors and the social relevance of the themes dealt with in these fields constitutes an important overlap and sets them apart from other, related academic disciplines.

5.4. The Proximity of Religion and Development and Diaconia Discourses in a Global Perspective

With the recent advances in the conceptualisation of ecumenical diaconia, development and diaconia move epistemically closer together. The discourse on diaconia, especially with reference to ecumenical diaconia, has borrowed heavily from the development debate. Departing from what one could call a static understanding of diaconia as assistance, the concept has evolved to include the dynamic notions such as transformation and empowerment, making ecumenical diaconia a concept, which, similar to development, relates to social change. The focus on rights-based approaches in both diaconia and development contributes to the new epistemic proximity. Moreover, it needs to be emphasised that the separation of the discourses on religion and development and the field of diaconal studies is a phenomenon of the Global North. In the Global South, both go hand in hand. One example is the South African academic landscape, in which discourses on religion and development, theology and development, and diaconia are closely intertwined and sometimes even used interchangeably (Bowers-Du Toit 2016, fn. 1). This is exemplified in the works of scholars such as Ignatius Swart (Swart 2021; Swart et al. 2022), Nadine Bowers-Du Toit (Bowers Du Toit 2019; Bowers-Du Toit 2016), Simanga Kumalo (Kumalo 2015, 2014), and Jacques Beukes (Beukes and Beukes 2023; Beukes 2019), among many others. An example from practice is the Latin American Protestant Foundation, the diaconia and development wing of the Evangelical Church of the River Plate, which uses diaconia and development almost interchangeably, as the website illustrates: "Diaconia that transforms . . . we work for social and environmental development in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay" (Hora de

Hobrar 2021). Lastly, the close overlap of the debates on ecumenical diaconia and religion and development, particularly from the perspectives of the Global South, is illustrated by the contributions in the recent major *International Handbook on Ecumenical Diakonia* (Ampony et al. 2021). Many of the chapters on the Global South could equally well appear in an international handbook on religion and development.

6. Reshaping Diaconal Studies as Internationally Oriented Study of Religious Social Practice

Drawing on both the recent dynamic in the debate on and conceptualisation of diaconia as ecumenical diaconia and the broadened scope of diaconal studies as the study of the impact of religion on society, a broad perspective for diaconal studies as an academic discipline emerges. Taking the understanding of diaconia as ecumenical diaconia as a basis for what the subject matter of diaconal studies could be opens up manifold pathways of inquiry. Referring to the forms of ecumenical diaconia outlined in the WCC/ACT Alliance document, this could relate to the comprehensive and multifaceted role of religion in society, be it in "individual acts of care, healing and reconciliation", in "institutionalized assistance for marginalized groups and those suffering", in "community work and empowerment", in "efforts to transform living conditions and political frameworks contributing to injustice and conflicts, addressing the whole of society in advocacy and lobbying work on behalf of those suffering", in "addressing misbalances of power, access and participation in societies, speaking truth to power, denouncing structural injustices", or in "addressing fundamental issues of the protection of the environment and of climate justice" (WCC and ACT Alliance 2022, pp. 49–50).

The subject matter of diaconal studies should thereby not be limited to phenomena that are expressis verbis marked as diaconia or ecumenical diaconia, as the terminology of diaconia is not used in all contexts, across different churches or let alone across different religious communities. The content, however, of the kind of religious social practice described under the headline of diaconia is applicable across contexts and across religious communities. It constitutes an important and coherent object of study. If we accept the proposition that religion and religious communities have an impact in society and that an important theme of the contemporary religious resurgence is religious communities' aim to bring about change in the world (Hegland 1987a, 1987b), then this engagement of religion in society merits specific academic attention. This could be the basis for a refocused role of diaconal studies as the Study of Religious Social Practice in the era of globalisation, (post-)crisis, and religious pluralisation.

It is important to emphasise that the Study of Religious Social Practice should focus on a critical investigation of the phenomena under consideration. The scope of the field of diaconal studies as the Study of Religious Social Practice as envisioned here should not be limited to what in terms of a priori-defined normative paradigms could be considered a "positive" contribution to society or "positive" transformation. The scope should be the entire breadth of religious social practice in local and global perspective, not normatively asking for a specific contribution to normative ideas, but primarily investigating the *how* and *why* of religious social practice. This would by no means be limited to actions. The theological and ideological foundations would need to be considered as well (but unlike in approaches from theology or religious studies, this might not be the main or exclusive focus). Neither would such an approach preclude making normative statements about religious social practice. The question of how specific elements of religious social practice should be structured to achieve specific aims (for instance, how religious organisations structure their work efficiently) would well fall within this scope. However, the normative basis would always need to be made explicit and be subject to academic debate itself.

Of such a broadened discipline of the Study of Religious Social Practice, the field of religion and development, as outlined in the first section, would be a natural part. However, studying religion and development within a framework of the wider Study of Religious

Social Practice would yield several conceptual advantages. Some of these conceptual advantages are highlighted in the following sub-sections.

6.1. Sustainable Development as a Global Concern

It has been mentioned above that, in the context of the new global framework provided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in theory, development ceased to be an affair of a subset of countries considered "developing countries". The SDGs apply to all countries of the world. In practice, however, such an understanding is not fully recognised, and the division of the world according to categories of development persists in people's minds. The field of religion and development is to a large extent still predicated on this division. It is predominantly research relating to countries in the Global South that is considered a part of this field or is explicitly related to it. Where countries in the Global North are part of the conversation, they are not considered a site of development sui generis, but the focus is on development cooperation with countries of the Global South (for instance, in the works of Garling 2013; Holenstein 2010). The field of the Study of Religious Social Practice more easily allows for the inclusion of contexts in the Global North, as it does not presuppose the division along the developed/underdeveloped line. It, hence, offers a more-comprehensive scope for the Study of Religious Social Practice without limiting this to a specific category of countries.

6.2. Moving beyond Development

Religion and development as a field carries with it the baggage of the history of development, which, as indicated in Section 1, has been severely criticised in the context of the post-colonial and post-development debates. A field resting on the term of development is constantly under pressure to justify its existence and to distance itself from the problematic history of the term and associated practices, policies, and ideologies. The Study of Religious Social Practice would not carry this baggage. Contributions to the field could engage with questions of development where this makes sense, but would of course also be free not to make reference to development at all. The field could thereby more naturally relate to the post-development discourse and the pluralistic visions emerging therein, without necessarily having to position them as alternatives to mainstream development. The Study of Religious Social Practice would, hence, be able to easily incorporate the arguments of the post-development and post-colonial debates. The Study of Religious Social Practice would not be confined to the conceptual apparatus of development, but could go beyond existing paradigms. For instance, the question of the reduction of consumption or the question of power, both of which are currently not featuring in the SDGs as the main contemporary development paradigm, could easily become thematic angles in the field, without having to justify whether or why they constitute a contribution to the field. Moreover, it would also be easier to connect to other discourses within the realm of religion and society, for instance the debate on religious social capital or the relationship of religion and social cohesion. Importantly, the field of religious social practice could more unequivocally incorporate the literature on religion and humanitarianism (cf. Ager and Ager 2015; Ferris 2011; Wilkinson 2020, 2023) within its scope.

6.3. Broadening the Study of Diaconia

The study of diaconia in Europe could benefit substantially from incorporating the international perspectives and the idea of transformation and development. The international debates on faith-based and rights-based diaconia, on the relationship of spirituality and service in secular, religious, and religiously pluralistic contexts have much to offer to diaconal reflection in Europe. This could contribute to continuing the process of broadening the understanding of diaconal reflection beyond notions of assistance and aid. Moreover, the discipline could thereby further broaden its perspective beyond the current main focus on the European context. It would thereby gain relevance as a discipline, while at the same time enriching the global debate from a specific regional perspective. Engaging in

the field of religion and development would be a move to leave Europe as the principal geographic frame of reference. Researching religious social practice in the Global North would be one among several focal points of the Study of Religious Social Practice. Such an internationalisation of the discipline of diaconal studies into an internationally oriented Study of Religious Social Practice would also be a move resonating with the post-colonial debate in the sense that it de-centres the academic discourse in a way that Europe becomes one of several research contexts (cf. Chakrabarty 2008's notion of provincializing Europe).

6.4. A Multireligious Perspective

Lastly, the processes of deconfessionalisation and secularisation in many parts of Europe and the global trend of religious pluralisation call for a multireligious scope of the Study of Religious Social Practice. An exclusive focus on the Christian faith seems increasingly hard to justify, especially when looking at religious social practice in international perspective. Its characteristics do not fundamentally differ across religious traditions, and there is, hence, little justification for studying it separately. While doctrinal justifications of social engagement might differ, the social practice is often similar.

A case in point is the partnership between two large international religious organisations, the Lutheran World Federation and Islamic Relief, which signed a memorandum of understanding to cooperate in humanitarian work in 2014, subsequently renewed in 2017. They emphasize the commonalities of their work and the common values (LWF 2014; IRW 2017):

> With shared values of compassion and justice, and a common vision to ease human suffering, IRW and LWF are committed to bringing a unique faith understanding to humanitarian programmes. Their joint advocacy and research initiatives have helped secure the inclusion of faith actors in all aspects of aid work—a perspective that has been widely overlooked but is increasingly critical in our fragile and divided world. . . . IRW and LWF will be mainstreaming faith sensitivity in aid work and building the capacity of humanitarians to respond to the reality of faith as something fundamental to the people they serve. . . . IRW and LWF will coordinate on key strategic priorities including the role of faith in refugee protection, gender-based violence, climate change and achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. (IRW 2017)

If the social practice of religious communities is highly similar and comparable, there is little justification for studying them in separate disciplinary frameworks. In a given regional or regulatory context (e.g., contexts of specific countries or the context of international humanitarian work), religious communities' social practice might show more similarities than differences, and hence, there would be substantial merit in studying them in the same discipline, hence the Study of *Religious* (and not Christian) Social Practice.

7. Conclusions

What would be the scope of the Study of Religious Social Practice? Following the line of thought embarked on by Bäckström (2012), the overarching theme of inquiry in this field would be the impact and role of religion in society, deliberately wide and not limited to specific expressions of religious social service or particular contexts. It would certainly include institutionalised religion, but not be limited to organisational perspectives. It would include notions of lived religion and the perspective of "what the members do" (Klaasen 2020, p. 122), as individuals and as communities, locally, nationally, and internationally. The scope of inquiry would encompass the micro, meso, and macro levels. Importantly, it would include investigating normative notions on society in religious communities and the implications and consequences for action they lead to at the individual level, as well as in the public sphere. It would also include the possibility of engaging in normative reflections on what the role of a specific religious community should be (e.g., What should the church do against poverty?) or how religious social services should be structured to carry out their work efficiently. However, it would also need to make explicit the ends

and normative criteria such reflection is based on (religious tenets, economic efficiency, the Sustainable Development Goals, or whatever it may be). Within this framework, the study of diaconia in its current form, the study and further conceptualisation of the recently advanced concept of ecumenical diaconia, and the field of religion and development would find their place along other subfields and pathways of inquiry.

Naturally, the question arises what distinguishes such a broad discipline from other fields of study. Would it be distinct enough, say, from religious studies or the sociology of religion? The Study of Religious Social Practice would be interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary in nature, drawing on various academic disciplines and closely connecting to extra-academic actors and including them in the knowledge-creation processes. In terms of academic disciplines, important reference disciplines would of course be religious studies, theology, sociology, social work, political science, anthropology, economics and management sciences, regional studies, and development studies. However, the focus would be distinct from each of them, as the Study of Religious Social Practice would take a perspective on the social consequences of religion and look at the phenomena studied with these consequences as a key hermeneutical lens. Religion itself, as the object of investigation of religious studies,[8] and all the phenomena associated with it, does not constitute the object of study as such, but only in terms of its social consequences and impact; theological reflection on tenets and religious imperatives would be relevant only insofar as their social consequences are concerned; processes of religious change, such as secularisation and pluralisation, would remain located within the sociology of religion, except for the analysis of their implications for the religious social practice; and so forth.

While there would certainly be a focus on the Christian sphere in the beginning because of the Christian history of the field, the focus of the Study of Religious Social Practice should broaden its scope to include other religions and religious movements as well, also in light of its international scope and trends of religious pluralisation in many contexts. It can thereby draw on both the long-standing tradition of the investigation of Christian social practice and its motivations, as well as the burgeoning literature produced to date in the framework of the religion and development debate. A case in point for the viability and necessity of the multi-religious and international scope of the Study of Religious Social Practice is the emergence of multi-religious networks such as the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD n.d.) and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLIFLC n.d.), which bring together actors from various different religious traditions along with secular actors to reflect on religious social practice and engage in joint action.

Finally, building on the approach outlined here, it remains for further studies to reflect on suitable theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the Study of Religious Social Practice and to discern how the approach presented in this article could be implemented at universities, universities of applied sciences, research institutions, and academic teaching.

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1 The origins of the academic study of diaconia can be found in the Berlin Institut for Social Ethics and the Study of Inner Mission ("Berliner Institut für Sozialethik und Wissenschaft der Inneren Mission") at the University of Berlin and the International Institute of Social Sciences in Geneva emerging in the context of the Life and Work Movement (Eidt and Eurich 2016, p. 349; Keller 1930).

2 See Petersen (2019) for an overview of recent initiatives in the European context.

3 As Jones and Petersen (2011) point out, much of the academic research in the field was in fact initiated because of policy interests and specific government funding.

4 While much of the literature in this field highlights a positive role of religion in development (cf. Öhlmann et al.'s (2021) potentials-oriented approach), it is important to point out that the role assumption of the relevance of religion holds in cases in which religion fosters and in which religion obstructs development objectives (cf. Thomsen 2017).

5 Even the German protestant churches' agency for diaconia and development considers the term "diaconia" so uncommon in English-speaking contexts and outside Germany that, in the official English translation of its name, "Evangelisches Werk für Diakonie und Entwicklung", the German term "Diakonie" was kept (Protestant Agency for Diakonie and Development; see Brot für die Welt n.d.), with the argument that the unique German expression of Diakonie cannot be translated into English—notwithstanding the substantial debate and conceptual engagement with diaconia in the global ecumenical movement.

6 For an overview of the history of diaconia in the ecumenical movement, see for example, Werner and Ross (2021).

7 A reduction of consumption in the Global North has long been on the agenda of churches in the Global North, as for instance, the work of the Church Development Service in Germany illustrates (Bedford-Strohm 2018; Riek 2018).

8 Notwithstanding the debate on whether one can actually speak of religion in the sense that it constitutes an object of study for the discipline of religious studies (Bergunder 2014; Goldstein et al. 2016).

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