

Concordia University

School of Graduate Studies

DOCTORAL THESIS DEFENCE

The Oral Examination

for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy of

Michelle Bakker

in the

Department of Religion

will take place on

Tuesday, August 16, 2016

in room LB-362, 1400 de Maisonneuve Blvd. W.

at 1:00 p.m.

Thesis Title:

**Concerning Development: An Ethnography of Contingency and Ethics in
a Cross-Cultural, Faith-based Aid Relationship**

Examining Committee:

TBA, Chair

Dr. Frederick Bird (Political Science, University of Waterloo), Supervisor

Dr. Andrew Ivaska (History)

Dr. Norma Joseph (Religion)

Dr. Michael Oppenheim (Religion)

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ABSTRACT

Concerning Development: An Ethnography of Contingency and Ethics in a Cross-Cultural, Faith-based Aid Relationship

Michelle Bakker, Ph.D. in Religion
Concordia University, 2016

This dissertation is an ethnographic case study of an international faith-based development aid relationship between two Protestant Christian non-governmental organizations: World Renew (which is North American and Christian Reformed) and Anglican Development Services (which is Kenyan and Anglican). This relationship, I argue, includes a number of influential bodies besides the NGOs themselves. Faith-based development aid praxis materializes in dialectic with the practical ethical demands of both supporters and beneficiaries. These demands illustrate and are contingent on the socio-economic structures of disparate cultural-religious lifeworlds.

The aim of this dissertation is to unravel ways that faith affects development praxis in a relational context of multiple, sometimes countervailing, priorities, desires, expectations, and demands – variously rooted in religion, history, economics, and culture. Employing fieldwork observations and interviews, primary texts, and secondary literature to gain a sense of these demands and their sources, I demonstrate how the religious worldviews of disparate communities inform the discourse, goals, and multi-directional responsiveness of development praxis. At the same time, the study shows that these development organizations in certain ways also influence the very expectations of supporters and beneficiaries to which they are subject. By examining this complex dialectic – or, rather, multilectic – of demands and accommodations thereof, I map routes by which faith comes to fruition in this NGO relationship.

The original scholarly contribution of this project is a new ethnographic study of the impact of religion on the work of development aid, a project that is unique for studies of religion and development, anthropology of religion, Christianity in Africa, and development aid in East Africa. The study also involved writing a history of World Renew, an organization for which no such cohesive historical narrative had yet existed. The project demonstrates the necessity of highly localized research for long-term, sustainable development; it reveals how religion can be a critical aspect of local socio-economies; and it shows the contingent, dynamic nature of religious faith and of the expression of faith in ethical demands.