This is report of a workshop jointly conducted by the University of Minnesota, The University of Toronto, New York University and the American University in Cairo. This workshop is part of a wider project being funded by the Luce Foundation in order to understand the relationship between religion and humanitarianism. Participants in this conference were mostly drawn from academia, and the majority were graduate students from North America. Nida Kirmani and Willem Van Eekelen were invited to attend as representatives of Islamic Relief, which was the only FBO that was represented amongst the workshop participants.

The concept of ‘humanitarianism’ refers to the ideology that underlies humanitarian relief efforts and is related to tangentially to development discourses. ‘Humanitarianism’ is largely concerned with the provision of humanitarian aid, especially during disasters and in emergency situations. Underlying the concept of ‘humanitarianism’ is the drive to work towards the betterment of ‘humanity’ rather than any particular group. Therefore, although the discourse of ‘humanitarianism’ is not explicitly concerned with long-term processes of development, there are significant overlapping concerns. However, many of the themes discussed during the workshop would be of interest to the RaD programme. Themes included the relationship between faith and humanitarianism, the role of religion in the development of a humanitarian ethic, the problematic division between faith/religion and religious/secular, the role of faith based organisations and religious groups in humanitarian intervention, and the relationship between humanitarianism to colonialism and neo-imperialism.

Although ‘humanitarianism’ is not synonymous with ‘development’, there was a great deal of overlap between some of the issues and examples being discussed in the workshop with development-related themes. For example, the presentation by Glen Chua looked at the impact of the Pentecostal Church on a village in Tanzania, looking
particularly at how the Church participated in providing social welfare in the community. He also looked at the teachings of the local Pentecostal Church about ideas related to spiritual and physical welfare, arguing the people may have been attracted to the Church for the sense of security it provided in otherwise uncertain times. His work is closely related to the work on the Values and Beliefs component. His research presentation can be found at http://www.humanitarianisms.com/presentations/Chua-Born%20Again.pdf.

The work of Emma Varley may also be of interest to the RaD programme. Her research looks at the role of faith-based organisations in sectarian conflict in Northern Pakistan. Her paper spoke particularly to the impact of sectarian conflict on the (selective) provision of reproductive health services by Muslim FBOs in Gilgit.

Furthermore, many of the guest speakers that the workshop organisers invited to speak were members of faith-based organisations who were involved in local development-related activities. For example, Nabil Abadir spoke about the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services, which provides social welfare services in underserved areas of Egypt. Sherif Abdel Azim spoke about Resala, which is a faith-based voluntary initiative that has been growing rapidly in Cairo and provides services to the poor in different parts of the city. Finally, Willem Van Eekelen and Nida Kirmani spoke about the work of Islamic Relief as a faith-based humanitarian aid organization in various parts of the world. They spoke about some of the complexities of being an FBO, especially in the current post-9/11 context.

The project on religion and humanitarianism is only now being developed, and it is yet unclear what activities the principal researchers plan on undertaking in the future. As of right now, they seem to supporting graduate students in this field and creating a network of interested academics largely in North America. Information about this project as well as about the Cairo Workshop can be found at: http://www.humanitarianisms.com. Also, the research presentations given by the graduate students can be found at: http://www.humanitarianisms.com/presentations.htm. Several of these may be of interest to the RaD programme.