The ongoing debate about the cultural effects of globalization still oscillates between the polar opposites of arguments about increasing standardization and cultural homogeneity on the one hand, and re-enforced cultural pluralism through indigenizing differentiation on the other. Much of it appears to replicate arguments from earlier political science controversies about the cultural implications and effects of international development cooperation in both, theory and policy. While both debates are characterized by the common concern with the intended and unintended effects of global connectivity, their academic separation resonates with the fact that in the second half of the 20th century the globalization of religion (through mission, inter-faith dialogues, and increasingly: development policy) and the political project of development were largely unconnected.

In this paper, I wish to demonstrate that a theoretical synthesis of these debates as well as a historical analysis of their trajectories opens a new conceptual space for understanding the disenchating experience of modernity in Africa and the relatively recent emergence of religion as a key actor in ‘organized development’. I argue that rather through ‘co-opting’ – as opposed to emancipative – notions of civil society (such as ‘social capital’) religion is increasingly enlisted in development networks as a social service provider. This raises important questions as to how religious actors understand, negotiate and – most importantly – perform their role in social service provision. In this paper, I will answer these questions through an analysis of faith-based youth programmes and value education in public schools, especially in relation to sexuality and AIDS, in urban South Africa, highlighting tensions between governmental objectives and religious autonomy. The paper is based on extensive field research in the city of Cape Town.