

# Chapter 16

## Volunteering in Religious Communities

### Does it Contribute to Society? Calculating Social Yield

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#### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In a special issue of *Research on Social Work Practice* 21 (4), 2011, Ram Cnaan and Thomas McLaughlin launch an academic debate about ways to quantify the accomplishments of social work and social services as unique contributions to society. They argue that for too long social work has failed to claim this contribution since it was not expressed as a monetary value but only justified by recording and reporting what social work does. Cnaan and McLaughlin notice that whereas the for-profit private sector easily accounts for the value of items or services in monetary terms, the non-profit fields that rely on 'soft' technologies find it difficult to assess their value to society with the economic denominator of money as a criterion for valuation. Cnaan and McLaughlin call for a debate about valuation and cost-effectiveness in social work and social services, 'assessing the financial value of a public good or a problem' (2011, p. 386). According to them, this way is challenging, complex but needed, and will be ubiquitous in the future (2011, p. 385–387). A similar suggestion is made by Ros Scott (2011) in relation to the assessment of the value of volunteers working in hospitals: 'If volunteers are to be fully recognized as a strategic asset, we must be brave enough also to describe volunteers in business terms.'

These calls are relevant in times when European welfare states are transforming at a rapid pace and governments hand over tasks from the public sector to civil society. In relation to volunteering, Mook et al. bring up the information that monetary measures 'can be useful to funders and policy makers who want to understand the full impact of their investment in a nonprofit' (Mook et al. 2007, p. 505). Cnaan and McLaughlin argue that the non-profit social sector has to prove its value in alternative ways, also to show that they do need financial support in the form of founda-

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Ir. Jaap van der Sar of Oikos for his input in this article. I also thank the editors, the anonymous reviewers and Prof. Dr. Henk Tieleman for helping me structure my argument.

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tion support and/or government grants in order to survive in the new constellation. '[Their] inability to put a concrete value on the contribution of social service organizations can be detrimental. In an era of scarce resources, politicians and policy analysts search constantly to cut public allocations' (2011, p. 385).

This warning could also be applied to a special group of civil society agents: religious organizations. Everywhere in Europe and USA, the discussion about the social benefits of religious organizations is a topical one. Despite strong secularization, the decline in the number of church members, and an erosion of the willingness of European (religious and secular) populations to gather anywhere on a regular and committed basis (Davie 2007, p. 93), many studies show a positive and ongoing relationship between voluntary work in religious organizations and its impact on society (see for instance Dierckx et al. 2009; Van Tienen et al. 2011). Religious communities are known for their wide range of volunteers working in very different qualities with various tasks to fulfil. Examples are diaconal support, pastoral care, inter-religious dialogue and activities such as food aid and homework assistance for teenagers. Churches can also claim a role as the guardians of religious cultural heritage in the form of church buildings, as well as preservers of rituals related to birth, marriage and death. As we will see below, attaching a monetary value to these activities could be relevant for religious organizations as well. However, the question of how to quantify the value and impact of the work done within religious organizations is not self-evident.

This question is related to methodological, conceptual and sociopolitical questions. For some time now, social scientists have been discussing methodological ways for assessing the value of volunteer activity in monetary terms (see for instance Brown 1999; Handy and Srinivasan 2004; Mook et al. 2007). Three main estimation models are used: the replacement value (the value of tasks performed by volunteers, had they been performed by paid staff); the opportunity costs (which reflect the investment in time and energy as estimated by the volunteers) and the market value (how much value would the volunteers have generated if they had performed their tasks on a commercial rather than a volunteer basis).<sup>2</sup> These studies usually start with a 'disclaimer' which recognizes that it is methodologically and conceptually 'tricky' to express the value of volunteer work in monetary terms (see for instance Brown 1999, p. 4 and 7; Handy and Srinivasan 2004, p. 48; Guera 2008, p. 58.). The applicability of certain economic models is not self-evident, since the value of the work is not per se congruent with the market value and it is difficult to measure 'intangible effects' (Mook et al. 2007, p. 49). This applies in particular to volunteering, as it is inherent to volunteering that volunteers are not pursuing wages. Volunteering is motivated by other incentives, as 'some combination of self-interest and of concern for the well-being of others' (Brown 1999, p. 5).<sup>3</sup> In these cases, '[t]he challenge ... is to assess the monetary values of outcomes such as happiness, rehabilitation, obeying the law, neighborhood pride, and family reunifica-

<sup>2</sup> Cnaan and Kang 2011 provide an overview of possible valuation methods and explain their relevance for the non-profit sector.

<sup>3</sup> For an exploration of the relation between volunteering and altruism, see Haski-Leventhal 2009.

tion without the benefit of a market-driven dollar value', as Cnaan and Kang argue (2011, p. 389).

This chapter contributes to the ongoing debate regarding the consequences of measuring 'social benefit' or 'social solidarity' in 'hard' financial terms by discussing a special case of measuring the social value of religious organizations in the Netherlands. I will present the case of the Oikos Foundation, a Dutch ecumenical non-profit organization focusing on education and research regarding sustainable development, which has developed a method for calculating the value of the work of volunteers in faith-based organizations.<sup>4</sup> This method expresses the benefit of volunteer work for society in monetary terms.<sup>5</sup> Oikos has developed this method as a way to increase the visibility of volunteer work in general and of religious organizations in particular. It is presumed to lead to increased knowledge and understanding of what religious organizations such as churches do and signify, and to increase awareness among members of the value of their work (see Guera et al. 2008, p. 49). The method starts with registering how much work is done by volunteers and paid persons within a religious organization. The counted hours are linked to the tariffs of the Dutch social service sector (*Thuiszorg*). The next step is to see which part of this work is done by a professional organization elsewhere in society (such as governmental organizations or welfare organizations). In this way, what is 'saved' by society as a whole because of the work of volunteers within religious organizations becomes visible. This is what the Oikos method calls 'social yield' (SY, in Dutch: *maatschappelijk rendement*). Quantified in economic terms, the method's primary aim is said to make the social value of the (volunteer) work of religious organizations visible.

The Netherlands presents an interesting case, being a highly secularized society yet with a strong history of social commitment on the part of the protestant and catholic churches. This historically strong position of the churches is related to the unique Dutch sociopolitical system of 'pillarization' (in Dutch: *verzuiling*). Between approximately 1880 and 1960, Protestant, Catholic, socialist and liberal lifestyles were supported through separate institutions and organized in political parties, labour unions, newspapers, broadcasting corporations, schools, hospitals and recreational facilities. These so-called 'pillars' have been eroded since the 1960s and the sociopolitical influence of the churches has greatly diminished,<sup>6</sup> but the remnants of the pillars are still clearly visible in politics, law and culture. Despite a separation

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<sup>4</sup> In 2004, Oikos investigated the social yield ('SY') of all local Protestant church communities in the city of Utrecht, the Netherlands. In 2006, this was done for migrant churches in The Hague. In 2009, three more pieces of research were published, one about the SY of mosques, one about an Interchurch social welfare organization in Lelystad and one about Youth for Christ Netherlands. The reports (in Dutch) can be found on the website of Oikos: [www.stichtingoikos.nl](http://www.stichtingoikos.nl). The method was also used by researchers of Nijmegen University; see Guera, Glashouwer and Kregting 2008. They applied it to all 250–300 church organizations in the city of Rotterdam.

<sup>5</sup> The method is also applicable to volunteering in non-religious organizations; see Van der Sar and Van Rooijen 2012.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Norris and Inglehart 2004, p. 89 for statistical figures about the steep decline in church attendees and church members.

between church and state, the social and cultural activities of religious organizations can qualify for government subsidies. In the past 20 years or so, religion in the Netherlands has undergone a ‘double transformation’, first through the decline of institutional religion and second in the emergence of new spiritual forms and manifestations of religious communities in the public sphere (Van der Donk et al. 2006). In this context, new questions about the relation between state and religion have appeared in the public and political debate. One question concerns the issue that the Dutch government increasingly wants to delegate public tasks previously carried out by the state to local civil society organizations. Through the Social Support Act (*Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning*), municipalities can award local organizations ‘a responsibility in fostering the life skills and social participation of citizens and to increase the social cohesiveness of Dutch society’, as it is phrased by The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP 2011). Partners in the Social Support Act include religious organizations like churches, mosques and faith-based organizations. These religious organizations have to adapt to this responsibility, not only by professionalizing themselves, but also by making themselves visible as capable actors. This process is hindered by at least three factors. Firstly, many of these organizations work with volunteers; secondly, religious organizations (Christian, but especially Muslim) are increasingly regarded with suspicion<sup>7</sup> and thirdly, churches are not yet used to their altered societal role and position. A consequence of this third factor is that churches have problems with communicating their societal message (which is not unequivocal and often subject to fierce internal and external debate) (Bernts 2004, p. 152). Against this background of the changing role of religious organizations in a secular society, the question of measuring the social benefits of religious organizations in monetary terms is highly interesting and needs careful attention.

In this chapter, I will briefly reproduce the SY method as it has been used and explained in the Oikos reports, and show how it applies the economic model of ‘replacement value’ to religious organizations. Then I will broach the question of the applicability of this model by discussing the main merits and limitations of its method. We will see that this method offers opportunities for religious organizations to demonstrate their societal relevance in an alternative manner, by acting as any ‘normal’ civil society organization, no longer leaning on their traditional ‘charismatic’ authority. But there is also a risk for a cultural and religious impoverishment of the value of religious institutes since a functionalistic explanation of the value of religious organizations might not show their intrinsic, substantial significance. Finally, I will discuss the question of possible societal consequences of measuring the social benefit of religious organizations in monetary terms by looking at divergent public and political responses to the various Oikos reports. We will see that in these

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<sup>7</sup> Trust in the church has been low in the past 10 years, but the decline has recently been further affected by the impact of the discovery of large-scale sexual abuse of children in Catholic boarding schools in the 1960s. Grace Davie emphasizes that the trend of low institutional trust not only applies to religious institutions, but also to corresponding secular institutions (2007, p. 4). This is also visible in the SCP study (SCP 2011, p. 60–62).

studies, as well as concomitant debates, the use of certain economic terms requires a very precise way of formulating.

## Calculating Social Yield

Between 2003 and 2012, the Oikos Foundation carried out several studies about the SY of various religious organizations in the Netherlands. Oikos developed the SY method in an attempt to visualize an aspect of the value of the work of religious organizations which increasingly went unrecognized or unnoticed in a secular society. This concerns religious activities like diaconal work, pastoral care and providing churchgoers with a 'sense of direction', but also the preservation of 'cultural inheritance'. The method intends to calculate the value of work done in churches, mosques and faith-based organizations by literally looking at its exchange value in monetary terms. The time and energy invested by volunteers and paid persons in their organizations is counted and captured in euros, showing the amount of money which is 'saved' by society, as it implies that a certain activity does not have to be done by professionals elsewhere in society. As such, society could consider this sum a 'return' on a 'social investment' made by fellow members of their society.

This valuation method was developed by Ir. Jaap van der Sar, a senior researcher at Oikos, in the early 2000s, at a time when academic debate about the question of how to measure the value of volunteering had just begun (see, for instance, Burger et al. 1999; Van der Sar and Schoemaker 2003). Referring to the methodology for calculating Social Return On Investment (SROI) in the context of social enterprise, developed in the USA and introduced into Europe by the Dutch consultant Peter Scholten,<sup>8</sup> Van der Sar considered it a challenge to work out a method which would be able to show the social benefit of volunteer work.<sup>9</sup> His method can be classified as a form of 'Replacement Value' calculation, assessing what it would cost to produce the same benefit or good using an alternative action, one for which the costs can be more easily deduced (Cnaan and Kang 2011, p. 390). Van der Sar's idea behind the SY method is based on two notions. The first is the aspect of ranking, the second of relativity. Using a monetary ranking system, the relative value of the work done by volunteers in the religious organization can be compared with similar work done in the public sector. Normally, the value of these two forms is determined with different ranking systems, whereas now the economic denominator of money becomes the criterion for the valuation of both. Van der Sar explains this as follows in his reports: 'Money value is determined by an economic exercise in which (at least) two parties agree on a certain "exchange value." For both, there must be an acceptable balance between costs and benefits. Another way to determine the value of a certain asset or product is "redistribution," for instance of tax money

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.peterscholten.com/english.php>. Accessed 22 May 2013.

<sup>9</sup> For the research on Protestant Churches in Utrecht, an academic committee was formed which discussed the method and research results prior to publication (Van der Sar 2004, p. 38).

into public goods. A third form of value emerges from activities and goods that are based on the idea of the gift. However, the price of the gift is rarely accounted in monetary terms' (van der Sar et al. 2009, p. 18). This is where Van der Sar steps in. 'Sometimes', he argues, 'it can be relevant to compare exchange value and gift. Not to say that they are equal, but to relate them to each other' (van der Sar et al. 2009, p. 18). That is why Van der Sar looks at the 'social exchange value' which can be connected to a specific part of volunteer work done in churches, mosques and FBOs and then expressed in euros. This gives him the opportunity to assess their value in an alternative manner, which adds up to the outcomes of qualitative, descriptive and exploratory studies about the social benefit of religious organizations (Van der Sar et al. 2009, p. 12). This relation between money as ranking system and relative value is expressed in the report titles like 'Free and Precious', 'A present to society', 'Benefit for youngsters', 'Heartily' and 'Mosques valued'.

The first step in the calculation process is to figure out what work is done under the responsibility of a selected set of religious organizations (such as all Protestant churches in one or more cities) and how many hours are invested by volunteers and paid persons across the range of activities of this organization during a year. To count these hours and activities, at least three closely involved people per organization are interviewed, mostly board members (young and old, male and female), as well as church leaders or imams. The interviews take at least 2 h. The interviewees are asked to count as exactly and completely as possible which activities took place during the previous year, how many people made these activities possible and how many hours it took for each person to make these activities possible. The interviewers use lists with both common and unusual activities to help the interviewees to think of as many activities as possible. This results in long lists that show many hours of work. The researchers always use the lowest estimate of hours and persons that make the activity possible. If someone says that he or she used 4–6 h/week for a specific activity, like organizing language lessons or a football tournament, then 4 h are registered. The question is also asked if an activity, like computer lessons or Qur'an lessons, was organized on a weekly or monthly or other basis, and whether it stopped during holidays or in the summer.

After adding up the hours, each hour spent on running an activity under the responsibility of a church or mosque is linked with a certain rates used in the social service sector.<sup>10</sup> The nature of the task is taken as a starting point to determine a rate; no differentiation is made between the work of volunteers and paid staff within the organization.<sup>11</sup> In this way, a concrete figure emerges. To calculate the SY, only

<sup>10</sup> The rates of the Dutch Thuiszorg were used adjusted for inflation. The rates of the Thuiszorg, which is a specific field within the social service sector, were used because a considerable part of the work done here bears resemblance with the work done in the volunteer organizations studied. The Thuiszorg rates provide the possibility for using different scales. Since Thuiszorg rates are relatively low, their use helps to avoid the risk of over-estimation.

<sup>11</sup> The Oikos studies motivate this by stating that the greatest number of the counted hours in religious organizations is realized by volunteers as well as the fact that paid staff in religious organizations are financed by the members of the congregation. Exceptions are people with a subsidized job, those who work, for instance, as janitor in a mosque.

**Table 16.1** Outcomes of SY-studies carried out by Oikos

Year of publication	Organization	Counted hours	Amount in 'Thuiszorg' rate (€)	SY (€)
2004	18 Protestant churches Utrecht	408,000	17,200,000	8,900,000
2006	110 Migrant churches The Hague	1,100,000	43,000,000	18,000,000
2009	16 mosques the Netherlands	270,000	10,100,000	5,200,000
2009	Youth for Christ Netherlands	285,000	10,900,000	6,200,000
2009	Interchurch Social Welfare Committee (IDO) Lelystad	50,800	2,092,000	1,613,000

those activities which have an equivalent in professional organizations elsewhere in society are counted, for instance Dutch language lessons to foreign women, a consultation hour for questions about raising children or running a 'food bank'. In this way, it becomes possible to calculate what Dutch society would need to spend in monetary terms if this work were not done by people in a church or mosque, but by paid people within the government or a different organization (profit or non-profit). Not all activities carried out within the organizations have the same social relevance. Some activities yield a social return of 100%, while others yield 75, 50, 25 or 0%. For example, if a church or mosque devotes time to running a 'food-bank', the invested hours have a social return of 100%. However, when a board gathers for a meeting about the church or mosque administration, or even about the management of the food bank, the percentage is set to 0%, as these 'overhead' activities are included in the rates of the Social Service Sector (*Thuiszorg*). Just as the 'Thuiszorg' has different salaries for different jobs, the 'volunteer rates' take into account that certain tasks, like pastoral care, require more knowledge or specialization than serving coffee in the canteen. Some religious activities are also counted as returning a certain percentage of SY.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, the SY method goes beyond merely registering the work of volunteers within churches and mosques. To ensure the rating is performed in a consistent manner each outcome is checked by two people. The numbers provided as SY are rounded down in thousands. Table 16.1 provides an overview of these outcomes.

In Table 16.1, the 'counted hours' column record all hours spent in the religious organization as a whole, regardless of the SY. The column of 'Thuiszorg rate' multiplies the counted hours by the applicable Thuiszorg rate for each activity. In the

<sup>12</sup> Pastoral care is set at 75% and valued in the middle range of the rates. For pastoral work, one can find an equivalent professional in general welfare organizations. Pastoral work deals with questions about faith, but it also deals with questions of how to overcome the loss of a loved one, how to deal with a divorce, etc.; all work which is also done by professionals in social work organizations. A sermon, on the contrary, has a SY of 0%. Although it can inspire listeners to do any type of work with a positive SY, in itself the SY is put at 0%.

‘SY’ column, the methodology explained above is applied to correct for those activities which have reduced or no SY.

Apart from these calculations in euros, the outcomes are also presented in a different format. This means that it is not only monetary figures that can provide relevant information about the social value of religious organizations. The different reports are illustrated with elaborate descriptions of activities as well as the motivations of volunteers. Although space is too limited here to provide an exhaustive list, the activities and services mentioned below provide an indication of the social activities taking place. Regarding the social role of migrant churches, the 2006 report describes how they function as ‘safety nets’ for a variety of people (Van der Sar and Visser 2006). Particularly youngsters, newly arrived in the Netherlands without any family or who have run away from home, are cared for and given shelter. Migrant churches offer young people relaxing and educating activities while they meet with peers and adults who care about them. Volunteers assist in finding appropriate education, housing and navigating bureaucratic systems. Volunteers and paid persons in migrant churches also invest a considerable number of hours in assisting homeless people, prostitutes, drug addicts, ex-prisoners and victims of human trafficking. From the 2009 report on mosques, it appeared that mosque board members invest much time in referring mosque visitors to professional organizations in case of social, legal, mental, housing or education problems. Similarly, welfare organizations, public health organizations, local police, the local council and housing corporations knocked on the door of the mosques, trying to reach people who are otherwise difficult to reach for these professional institutions. In most investigated cases, these mosque networks were very large. Apart from religious activities, volunteers invested time and effort in providing sociocultural activities such as language lessons, sport activities and homework assistance. The Protestant churches in Utrecht (2004) show strong SY for society through their active role in debt counselling services.<sup>13</sup> This is also the case for the work of the Interchurch Social Welfare Committee (IDO) in Lelystad (published in 2009), where a group of Christian volunteers supports families and/or persons with debt problems. These are highly trained volunteers who do this work at the same level of professionalism as paid professionals. The asset of the SY method is that it captures the time and energy invested by volunteers and paid persons in these activities in a single figure: the euro sum. This sum intends to show the amount of money which is ‘saved’ by society.

### **Merits and Limits of the Method: Fictitious or Real Return?**

Below, I will enter into the question about the applicability of the method by discussing its main merits and limitations. Can we consider this ‘replacement value’ method a sound contribution to the research domain of the social valuation of vol-

<sup>13</sup> This is also the case in many other Protestant and Catholic churches, see Crutzen 2008.



unteer work done in religious organizations? An affirmative answer would emphasize two aspects. Firstly, the SY method attempts to describe a ‘fictitious’ return with a ‘real’ figure. A comparison based on a similar ranking system (money) provides insight into the relative value of this and comparable work done elsewhere in society. This enables a comparison between two different entities, which is necessarily made under clear methodological restrictions. As addressed in the introduction of this article, this holds true for all research which deals with the assessment of value to volunteering as well as social work in the non-profit sector. The Oikos study also extensively and repeatedly states its ‘disclaimers’. The monetary figures only provide estimates, not precise calculations. An obvious restriction is the fact that the hours of volunteers are not or seldom managed. The interviewees might have an inaccurate or deficient memory of the invested amount of hours or insight into the range of activities. Moreover, they do not only talk about their own time investment, but also that of their fellow volunteers. On the other hand, people were often surprised to realize how many hours they spent in making the organization work. To avoid any chance of presenting ‘too rosy’ a picture, the method systematically chooses the lower variant whenever more than one variant is recorded. Outcomes are the ‘minimal observed outcomes’. Registered hours and euros were rounded down to thousands. The rate of a certain activity within a religious organization, e.g. an hour of pastoral care to someone grieving, was rated lower than a similar activity performed by a professional, e.g. a psychologist or professional bereavement counsellor. In each organization, several people were interviewed but double counting was avoided as much as possible so that overestimation of the fictitious return could be avoided. Moreover, real replacement of such activities would be extremely costly to the public sector (see also Cnaan and Kang 2011, p. 393).<sup>14</sup> In their estimation of the percentage of SY, the researchers admitted that subjective choices were inevitable. Here, also, the research brings out that the aim is to avoid overestimations. Finally, the reports do not assess effectiveness or efficiency of the work done, although they assume that activities of religious organizations, including religious ones like assembling for prayer, do generate a social effect. Volunteers invest time and money assuming that it will return some benefit, although they might not see it as an investment in society but as a way to counteract loneliness or *fi sabil Allah*, for the sake of God. In this way, the method forms an alternative and an addition to other attempts to examine the social benefit of religious organizations to society, as it adds to the usual qualitative, descriptive-exploratory methods.

The second asset of the method is that it uses economic terminology to show the lasting relevance of religious organizations in a highly secularized society. Paul Schnabel, director of the SCP, foresees that this discourse will become more prominent in the near future. ‘Using economic terms like investment’, he says, is ‘not just figurative; the metaphors also reflect a changing reality and open new perspectives on the future’ (Schnabel 2006, p. 5). The benefit for society of religious organizations is brought into focus by embedding them in a secular discourse. Marginalized

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<sup>14</sup> Cnaan 2009 also works with conservative estimates, meaning the lowest estimate possible.

religious organizations, which experience a decline of their traditional charismatic authority, can capture their existence in a catchy phrase to highlight their social relevance to highly secularized people. Jurgen Habermas (2006) might consider using this kind of vocabulary part of the ‘complementary learning processes’ that secular and religious citizens must go through.<sup>15</sup>

However, here we touch upon an important objection to the method: the risk of reducing the social meaning of the churches and other religious organizations to a calculable, identifiable number. Their full social meaning might not become completely visible, nor understandable, when it is couched (only) in ‘hard’ economic terms. The method may challenge religious organizations to show, or even prove, their functional rationality. Religious organizations do have a functional rationality and their functional solidarity with society may become visible through the research technique. However, religious organizations do not have to be considered as primary welfare producers. Their rationality is, pre-eminently, not purely functional but also substantial. ‘The reality in which [these organizations] operate is also a cultural reality, a reality of values, norms and meanings which direct and structure people’s lives’ (Zijderveld 1987, p. 104, translation WB). Can this attachment to or solidarity with society also be made concrete in monetary terms? Labour, particularly when it concerns voluntary labour is often a combination of what Max Weber called *Zweck- und Wertrationalität*, of functional and substantial rationality. The sociologist Kees Schuyt catches this with the term convivial labour. He describes convivial labour as ‘work done in the service of living together, geared towards preserving this coexistence and making it qualitatively as good as possible. This labour does not exclusively focus on economic benefit; it is also focuses on a self-imposed responsibility, kinship, the will to live together, in order to expand joy in living’ (Schuyt 1995, p. 90, translation WB). Precisely since ‘convivial labour’ is not exclusively in the service of economic benefit, the SY method carries within itself the risk of reducing the meaning of this kind of work to a functional economic one. Working in the service of society should not be brought under the same financial-economic yoke as economic labour, Schuyt argues. According to him, ‘it would be a gross cultural impoverishment if our western society were to unlearn the art of convivial coexistence, just because only one kind of labor would be recognized and calculated’ (1995, p. 90). This risk might be particularly present in a highly secularized environment, since ‘people who consider rationality exclusively as functional rationality,—as being typically modern,—often take religion as irrational’, to quote the sociologist Anton Zijderveld (1987, pp. 104–105).

Another critical question can be added: What kind of social bonds or forms of solidarity are reflected in the financial figure? The ‘society’ that benefits remains unspecified, but citizens in society at large might not regard (all) activities carried out within religious organizations, or (any) admonitions or advice brought up in pastoral care, as beneficial to society. The method always shows a positive contribution: Input of time always generates a social return if a professional equivalent ex-

<sup>15</sup> Habermas: ‘secular and religious citizens can only fulfill the normative expectations of the liberal role of citizens if they likewise fulfill certain cognitive conditions’ (2006, p. 4).

ists, regardless of what is said or done by the actors. The method does not critically address what Cnaan calls externalities: 'by-products of activities that enhance (positive externalities) or damage (negative externalities) the well-being of people or the environment' (2011, p. 387). Cnaan and McLaughlin are aware of these problems, which accompany attempts to quantify social work in monetary terms, but they introduce the argument that neither positive nor negative externalities are reflected in market prices (2011, p. 387). For the time being, Cnaan states that 'the valuation of negative externalities is more problematic than our current knowledge makes possible' (2009, p. 642).

## Public and Political Response

That these risks and questions are not only theoretical becomes clear when we look at widely divergent public and political responses to three of the Oikos studies. These responses will help us to discuss the question whether SY and similar methods can be regarded as a suitable way for religious organizations to prove their value to society. The reactions also show that the debate about finding ways to quantitatively assess the accomplishments of religious organizations is indeed not just an academic one, but a political and societal discussion as well. First we will look at how the publication of the report about migrant churches made them visible to the municipality of The Hague (Van der Sar and Visser 2006). Then we will see how an ecumenical organization in the provincial town Lelystad used the outcomes to strengthen their position as a church organization in relation to their municipality, providing themselves with a 'license to operate' (Van der Sar 2009). The responses to the mosque report show a very different attitude (Van der Sar et al. 2009). Here, public debate turned into a discussion about the 'cost and benefit' of (Muslim) migrants when the populist Party for Freedom (PVV) raised the question: 'what does an immigrant cost?'

After the publication about the migrant churches in The Hague in 2006, it became clear to the town council how important migrant churches were as a shelter and crisis centre for various people such as drug addicts, the homeless, victims of human trafficking, people without residence permits and teenagers. As a consequence, secular politicians and policymakers took an interest in these matters; after discussing the results, they took a favourable stance towards the requests by migrant churches for meeting rooms and they actively cooperated in looking for new church buildings. For their part, volunteers in migrant churches realized that they could strengthen their own performance and started to improve their approach to reach people in need of their services.

In Lelystad, a provincial town in the middle of the Netherlands, the interchurch social welfare organization IDO also became more visible to the local municipality. The board of IDO took an active stance by commissioning a study carried out by Oikos in 2009. In their foreword to the report, they expressed their willingness to use the outcome to sustain their work in Lelystad. By showing the value of their

work, they wanted to convince the local authorities that it was worth the investment to subsidize their activities (Van der Sar 2009). The board successfully negotiated with the local authorities to continue supporting IDO's diaconal work 'realizing that an investment of one Euro from the municipality would generate the saving of almost 10 € in other parts of their budget'.<sup>16</sup>

Also eye-catching was the report on mosques (Van der Sar et al. 2009), but this evoked a very different set of reactions. The report on mosques, published in 2009, calculated the contribution of all Dutch mosques as saving a minimum of € 150 million per year.<sup>17</sup> This result caused tumultuous reactions, not least in the political arena. The research was commissioned by the Ministry for Home Affairs and Kingdom Relations. In some reactions, the carefully formulated research question was rephrased into a simple counter-question: 'and how much does a mosque cost society?' The populist PVV, led by Geert Wilders, used the opportunity to request the government to calculate 'how much an immigrant costs society', which they assumed to be far more than their contribution.<sup>18</sup> This was the opposite effect of what the cooperating mosques had had in mind. They appreciated the fact that their activities were investigated with exactly the same research method as other religious organizations, instead of the more common research question of 'how well mosques are integrated'. For them, the hope dominated that, in this way, they could make visible what happens within a mosque, and that this could also be regarded as a valuable contribution to society as a whole, as a positive input in the heated public debate about Islam. The often spiteful public remarks clearly showed the reality of the aforementioned risk of reduction of the research method to a simple 'cost-benefit-analysis' in which the religious organization is to 'prove' its functional rationality. The fact that the other reports did not give rise to as many fierce reactions also shows that public and political opinions about the target of social solidarity differ.

The considerations for providing government subsidies to social work carried out under the responsibility of religious organizations are outside the scope of this article. This does not mean that the question is irrelevant. The SY reports bring in information that can be used in discussions about the feasibility of government subsidies, but, as we have seen, the interpretation of this information by various actors differs. Furthermore, the government can choose to provide or deny government grants on the basis of principled or pragmatic considerations (see Davelaar and Smits van Waesberghe 2010; Dierckx et al. 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Written by the Board of IDO in the preface to Van der Sar 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Extrapolation to all 475 mosques in the Netherlands of the result of the 16 mosques researched (see Table 1.16).

<sup>18</sup> On 20 July 2009, PVV member of Parliament Sietse Fritsma sent 79 parliamentary questions to the Cabinet, addressed to the Ministers of 12 Departments (numbers 2009Z14076–86). Normally, the answering of questions from Parliament requires 6 weeks; in this case, it took about 6 months before a reaction to the questions was published.

## Concluding Remarks

In highly secularized societies, religious organizations are searching for ways to bring into focus their value to secular citizens who might no longer accept their social relevance automatically, uncritically or unconditionally. This chapter has described the case of a Dutch Christian civil society organization, Oikos, which applied a specific method of measuring the social value of religious organizations. In this context, the advantage of the 'replacement value' method described above has become clear. At a single glance, one can see the vast amounts of money which religious organizations and its volunteers 'save' society, if professional organizations elsewhere in society were to have to do this work. This benefit to society is expressed in a vocabulary which can be understood by a 'secular citizen' (compare Habermas 2006). The method provides religious organizations with an instrument to emphasize their social value, thereby counteracting the process of marginalization from the public sphere. We saw that several Christian organizations (the interchurch organization IDO and migrant churches) have actively used this as a technique to demonstrate their social relevance (trying to obtain government grants or support for their welfare activities). Mosques also wanted to show their social contribution to Dutch society, but did not receive the appreciation they had hoped for.

The SY method is presented by Oikos as an attempt to demonstrate something which otherwise would not become visible. Nevertheless, the use of economic terminology (whether metaphorically or not) does imply a certain risk, both methodologically as well as sociopolitically. Although the method extensively indicates its limitations, it carries the risk of reducing the rationality of a religious organization to its functional meaning. When religious organizations are only appreciated using these norms, there might be a risk of 'commodifying social solidarity', particularly if economic metaphors are taken literally. This not only applies to the method used by Oikos, but also to other existing methods which try to capture the value of voluntary work in monetary terms. Although these studies do not intend to reduce the outcome of 'replacement value' studies to a simple 'cost-benefit-calculation', this is a realistic pitfall, judging by the fierce reactions to the mosque study. Like IDO and the migrant churches, the mosques attempted to prove their legitimacy by means of the SY method; however, this had very different sociopolitical consequences. It is not easy to communicate the subtleties of the notions of reciprocity and gift when an economic denominator is used which derives from another class of economic exchange. Moreover, it is neither evident nor uncontroversial that religious organizations should be considered as primary welfare producers and that their efforts must be quantified at all.

A concrete figure tends to 'stick in the memory' but also easily provokes reactions. These reactions contribute to an ongoing social and political debate about the meaning of solidarity and reciprocity in neo-liberal secular states as well as about the contribution of religious organizations and their volunteers to society as a whole. The outcomes of the SY studies can function as building blocks in these discussions, but they should not replace descriptive qualitative researches about the social benefits of religious organizations.

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