

Religion and its relevance to contemporary international relations with reference to international political economy, state and development in east Africa

Wasike David *

Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Business and Management (FBM), International University of East Africa (IUEA), Kampala Uganda.

International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2026, 19(01), 1215-1221

Publication history: Received on 13 March 2026; revised on 26 April 2026; accepted on 28 April 2026

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2026.19.1.0912>

Abstract

Religion is once again gaining its position as a useful category of analysis in the field of contemporary IR, particularly as regards governance, development, and international political economy issues. This paper seeks to examine the position of religion in the politics and economics of East Africa. In this regard, religion can be viewed not just as culture or ideology, but as a structural phenomenon that is integral to the systems of power, distribution and politics. By using a constructivist/secularist/IPE perspective, the religions are shown to function as political economic entities in the governance process, development initiatives, and transnational economic ventures. Through specific case studies involving countries such as Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan, and the DRC, it will be demonstrated that religion plays a crucial role in maintaining and disrupting the existing political economies according to their institutional arrangements. The model and empirical indicators for understanding the relations between religion and IPE/State/development is provided.

Keywords: Religion; International Political Economy; East Africa; Governance; Development; State; International Relations

1. Introduction

IR theories have historically concentrated on the secular-rational-statist paradigm, where the main driving force in international politics is the material power, institutional structures, and interstate interactions. From the perspective of both traditional realism and liberalism, international politics can be characterized by the dominance of the state, market, and institutions in an anarchic state system. As a result, religion could be considered merely as a private or marginal cultural phenomenon that is unlikely to affect world politics. However, it should be acknowledged that the secular-rational-statist epistemology has proved to be ineffective in addressing the changes taking place in the contemporary world politics. Over the last several decades, religion has transformed from a marginal to a significant transnational player that has actively been shaping the dynamics of international diplomacy, conflicts, development, and governance. Hence, the return of religion raises crucial issues for the secularization thesis and requires rethinking the conventional IR theory of religion (Haynes, 2013; Philpott et al., 2011).

However, the dynamic nature of religion is particularly clear in East Africa since religion does not constitute an entity independent of politics and economics but is an integral part of both processes. In this case, religious institutions constitute an integral component of governance and development institutions, which provides educational opportunities, health care, humanitarian assistance, and even financial resources to perform their primary roles as a moral community and an institution within the wider political economy context. Indeed, it can be seen from the recent studies that religion becomes a structural feature of world politics rather than just a legacy of the latter (Fox, 2015;

* Corresponding author: Wasike David; <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1829-2083>.

Haynes, 2013). However, the structural relevance of religion in East African states is particularly relevant considering the weak capacity of the state, hybrid governance models, and strong reliance of the state on civil society in terms of delivering public goods.

This situation is especially pertinent from the point of view of International Political Economy (IPE). Traditionally, the IPE paradigm has taken into consideration the way power, wealth, and resources are distributed between states, markets, and international institutions. However, this framework has often overlooked the role played by normative actors, including religious actors, in the creation of economic policy, welfare provisions, and the allocation of resources. Religious institutions are not marginal players in the context of East Africa, but instead actively participate in economic activities and their distribution.

As such, it is this article's intention to support the assertion that religion is a significant factor in the IPE of East Africa, acting as an institutional player as opposed to a marginal cultural player in the development of the IPE.

2. Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Constructivist Ontology

The constructivist ontological approach to the study of international relations suggests that global politics is not determined only by material factors, but rather by intersubjective meanings, common norms, and identities socially constructed. Following the ideas expressed by Alexander Wendt, constructivism assumes that "anarchy is what states make of it" implying that the conduct of agents is determined by the collectively constructed meaning rather than by structures. Under these circumstances, religion serves as one of the important social institutions that assist in the construction of identity, morality, and legitimacy. Indeed, religious beliefs and traditions influence people's understanding of the concepts of authority, moral values, and participation in the political process and have an impact on both domestic and international politics. As follows, religion should not be considered as a purely personal matter or a private sphere of life, but rather as a strong ideational component of society (Wendt, 1999; Fox & Sandler, 2004).

Based on this theoretical foundation, religion acts as a system of identity formation that defines political behaviors and power structures in varying environments. As noted by theorists such as Daniel Philpott, religion is used to generate cultural norms that can either justify or criticize political systems and policies. For instance, in some cultures, the use of religious beliefs is used to define the limits of the political community and its conceptions of justice, sovereignty, and statecraft. Thus, religion becomes an important factor in defining both the domestic political landscape and international politics through the establishment of cultural norms that guide the actions of states.

2.2. Ontology of International Political Economy (IPE)

Ontology of International Political Economy (IPE) is rooted in the basic assumption that political and economic systems are highly inter-dependent, constitute one another and are embedded in wider social relations. Classical and modern IPE studies prove that the power structure of the global economic environment cannot be analysed in the framework of state vs market dichotomy, but should be considered from the perspective of institutions, social norms and transnational actors which govern global/local processes (Strange, 1996; Gilpin, 2001). The research proposes developing the ontological approach to analyzing religion, not as an ideology or culture, but as an institutional formation that actively facilitates resource allocation and redistribution at different levels of society. In other words, religious organizations can be perceived in the same way as other non-state actors in the sphere of IPE, such as multinational corporations and international organizations – which are able to affect policy outcomes, use financial and social capital and set development trends (Thomas, 2005; Haynes, 2013).

In such a framework, religion plays a multidimensional role in the global political economy. Firstly, it serves as a governance actor by creating norms, affecting policies, and engaging in regulation and welfare, especially when the capabilities of the state apparatus are weak. Secondly, it acts as a means of redistribution by engaging in activities such as education, provision of health services, humanitarian relief, and finance intermediation, which lead to the redistribution of both tangible and intangible assets within society (Clarke, 2008; Berger, 2010). Thirdly, religion facilitates global capital movements by directing global funds, whether in the form of donations, remittances, or development aid, to local economies. Thus, religion emerges as a key actor that can no longer be ignored in the study of international political economy.

2.3. Post-Secular Governance Theory

The post-secular approach to governance goes against the classical approach to secularization which assumes that modernization results in secularization of public life. On the contrary, researchers like Jürgen Habermas propose that current societies should be described as being “post-secular” as their character involves not only secular but also religious worldviews operating together in the public sphere (Habermas, 2008). This means that governance is no longer seen as a process based on the secular paradigm only, but rather it emerges as a product of interaction between the secular worldview, religious rationality, state power, and governance mechanisms operating in the market. This means that religion remains an active element of the civic dialogue, service providing activities, and social engagement, state authorities retain formal governance powers, and market affects the distribution of resources for development (Casanova, 1994; Habermas, 2008).

Given the case of East Africa, it is possible to conceptualize the entire region as one post-secular system of governance wherein religion plays an active role alongside political and economic governance. According to empirical evidence, it has been shown that there exists a high presence of religion in the areas of provision of education, healthcare services, peace building initiatives, and humanitarian aid in cases where such roles are either supplementary or in lieu of government (Deneulin & Bano, 2009; World Bank, 2011). At the same time, there is active consultation between governments and religious actors in legitimizing certain policies and reform efforts that seek to develop markets. Such an existence of multiple governance systems leads to hybrid governance, which involves negotiations and interplay between institutions. East Africa therefore represents a real-life application of the post-secular theoretical perspective.

2.4. Perspective on Critical Political Economy

In the study of International Political Economy, Critical Political Economy emphasizes the importance of power imbalances and inequalities as driving forces behind international socio-economic dynamics. According to this approach, the sphere of religion does not exist independently from the global socio-economic dynamics but is a part of the global aid regimes, mechanisms for development financing and governance across borders. Scholars highlight that faith-based organizations (FBOs) operate as facilitators within the global political economy, mediating transfers from international donors to recipients while at the same time serving as agents of reproducing power relations and dependence (Haynes, 2007; Tomalin, 2013). In some instances, religious organizations are embedded into neoliberal approaches to development through involvement in service provision such as education, health care, and humanitarian aid activities, acting as substitutes for state actors in weak states (Clarke & Jennings, 2008).

In addition, critical scholars point out that religion is part and parcel of development dependencies and transnational regimes. Indeed, through collaborations between religion and international agencies such as World Bank and International Monetary Fund, religious organizations tend to support global agendas that are driven by capitalistic ideology, such as market liberalization and privatization (Deneulin & Bano, 2009). This clearly supports the view that religion does not exist on its own in an ideological vacuum but plays a role in the ideological framework of global capitalism. Therefore, while religion serves a vital role in the provision of welfare services, it may be used as an instrument for justifying existing economic inequalities (Fraser, 2013). Thus, a Critical IPE approach provides us with a way to analyze religion as an important player in global power dynamics, which is, in turn, influenced by globalization.

2.4.1. Conceptual framework

In the Religion-IPE-State-Development complex, religion is an agent that is part and parcel of a dynamic, multi-level interaction that goes beyond beliefs to become an important normative institution embedded within larger socio-political forces that influence the processes of development. From this perspective, religion can be seen as a mediating institution that interacts with other structures such as the international political economy in terms of flows of capital, trade policies, development funding, among others, while at the same time having interactions with the state, a key political institution that governs and implements policy initiatives (Haynes, 2013; Hurd, 2008). Indeed, the state itself seeks to assert its legitimacy and authority through relations with religious institutions, particularly when such religious organizations are involved in the delivery of services, community mobilization, and moral issues (Fox, 2008). This complex of relationships leads to development processes, which refer to social and economic changes, and include the delivery of welfare services, equity, inclusivity, and human capability development (Sen, 1999).

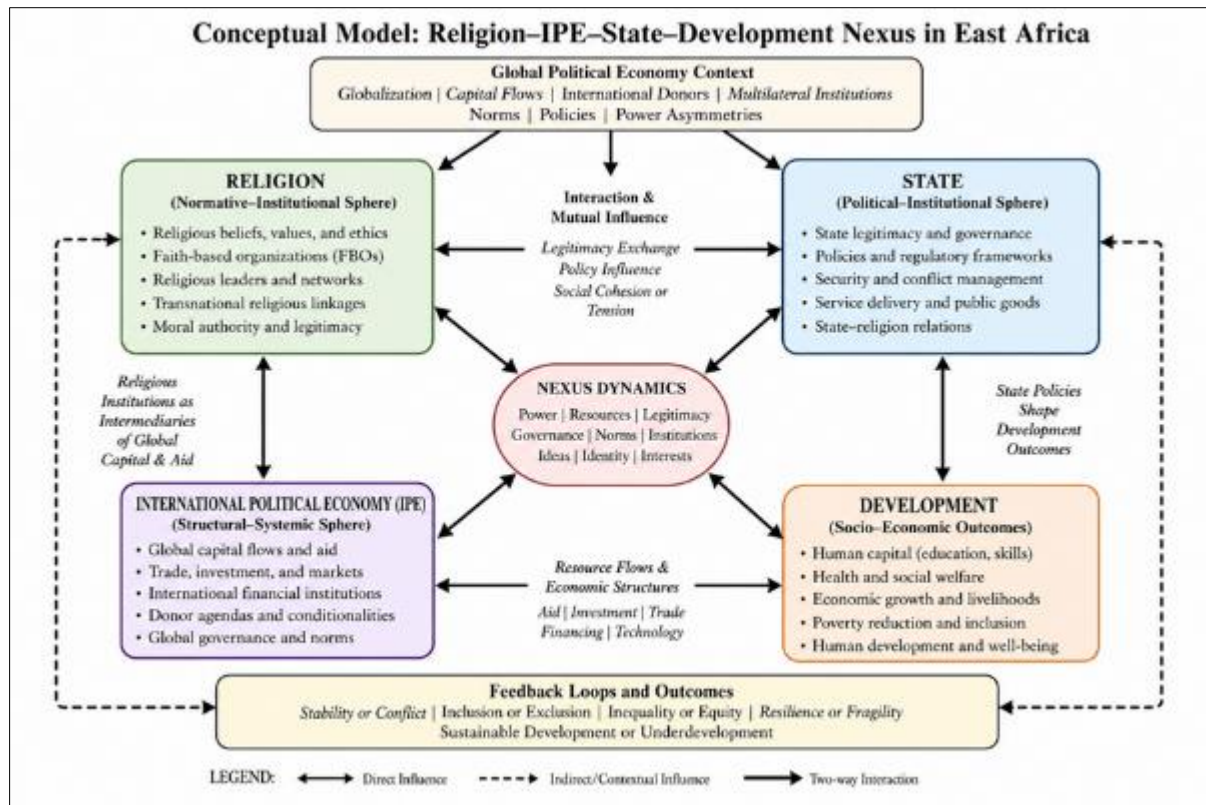


Figure 1 The Linkage between Religion-IPE-State-Development in East Africa (Conceptual Framework)

The intersection is additionally marked by intricate processes of power relations, resource allocation, legitimacy negotiation, and governance interactions, creating recursive feedback effects such as stability and conflict, inclusion and exclusion, and equity and inequality that either facilitate or hinder development paths. In such a way, religion plays the double part of mediator and structural element of global and local political economies and helps shape development processes by virtue of its institutional strength and transnational linkages.

3. Religion and Political Economy of Development in East Africa

3.1. Religion as Development Infrastructure

In East Africa, religious organizations have been steadily playing the part of development infrastructures – quasi-state organizations capable of providing much needed services to those areas where the presence of the state is limited. The churches and mosques in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania control huge numbers of educational establishments, hospitals, and social welfare services, offering necessary services to people who cannot afford state care (Bompani, 2010; Deneulin & Bano, 2009). In particular, research confirms that religious organizations are crucial suppliers of primary health care and education in those regions where governments' influence is not powerful enough (Bompani, 2010; Deneulin & Bano, 2009). For example, religious bodies have traditionally controlled numerous mission schools and health care facilities in Uganda; hence, they greatly influenced the formation of human capital development and the process of providing services to people (Green, 2015). Moreover, the role of religion in poverty alleviation, food distribution, and community-oriented development programs makes them key players of the national development infrastructure in East Africa (Clarke & Jennings, 2008).

This expansion of religious influence in the developmental process creates a kind of hybrid development regime where religious organizations act in lieu of the state and actually help to mediate the interactions of citizens and the state. From the point of view of political economy, this is a result of the inefficiency of state-led development and social legitimacy that allows religious institutions to mobilize and coordinate people better than bureaucracies can do (Haynes, 2007). In addition, transnational religious networks make it possible for global capital to reach local economies through the channels of donor money, remittances, and foreign investment (Ter Haar & Ellis, 2006). While such an approach provides greater flexibility and efficiency of development processes, it also gives rise to a set of important issues connected with the problem of accountability and equity, especially as religious institutions perform public functions

outside the government framework. Therefore, it is crucial to realize that religion is an inherent part of the political economy of development in East Africa.

4. Religion and Conflict Political Economy in East Africa

4.1. Religion as a Structural Variable in Conflict Systems

The position of religion in connection with conflict political economy is complex and layered in nature. Contrary to being seen as a causal agent of violence, religion functions as a structural variable which is highly connected to such issues as political exclusion, economic disparities, and inefficient governance. Speaking about the International Political Economy approach, the definition of conflict is much wider than merely being political. More precisely, the definition of conflict should be based on issues such as resource distribution, opportunity availability, and economic system control. Thus, religion acts as a structure through which conflicts are articulated.

It is necessary to add that religion is intertwined with other forms of discrimination, such as ethnicity, regionality, and economic inequality. This means that the complexities of conflict dynamics are increased and a single-factor approach to analyzing them becomes irrelevant. The impact of religion may be weakened or strengthened depending on the situation in weak states such as South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

4.2. Religious Identity and Politics

Religion can be seen as an important tool for political mobilization, especially in the situation when legitimacy of the state is under threat, and there is a lack of institutional trust. Religious discourse is used by politicians to legitimize their authority, increase political appeal among voters, and create morally justified narratives about political leadership. In that respect, religion turns into an effective resource for politicians who are capable of using it for making their governance more legitimate and culturally meaningful. Such approach is consistent with IPE approaches which emphasize that religion cannot be considered separately from political dynamics and is always a part of power and resource relations (Fox, 2008; Haynes, 2013). As a result, religious identity becomes an important resource for political purposes in multicultural society, including Uganda, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

With regard to election periods, it is possible to highlight increased political importance of religion as religious organizations and leaders may influence the process of voting either directly or indirectly. At times, religious discourses can be instrumental in fostering the emergence of exclusionary narratives that reinforce social cleavages based on religious doctrines and sects, while at other times, they can provide an ideological vehicle through which people can oppose an oppressive regime. As pointed out by Haynes (2013) and Philpott et al. (2011), the role of religion in the politics of today is characterized by the stabilizing and destabilizing impacts that result from its institutionalization into socio-economic and political systems. The mobilization of religion during elections in East Africa, therefore, illustrates the connection between morality and politics.

4.3. Extremism and Structural Political Economy Determinants

The rise of religious extremism in East Africa cannot be properly explained by ideological or theological arguments alone. Rather, it must be comprehended in the context of a broader political economy structure of vulnerability, marginalization, and recruitment prospects. In this regard, according to the perspective of IPE, extremism is a condition in which poverty coexists with weak governance and uneven development practices. The most significant structural determinants include high levels of unemployment among youth and poverty in general, particularly in urban and semi-urban environments; weak state capacity in peripheral and border regions; and the expansion of informal cross-border economic activities outside of regulatory reach (Haynes, 2013; Basedau et al., 2016).

Extremist organizations in this context include Al-Shabaab in Somalia and some regions in Kenya. The weakness in the structure of these states is used to incorporate ideologically driven stories into the story of economic and governance dissatisfaction. In the case of recruitments, they are religiously motivated and also provide opportunities for financial gain and protection. From this perspective, one can view extremism not just from the standpoint of ideologies but also from the political economy model, which suggests that extremism takes place in regions of poor governance and low resource endowment (Philpott et al., 2011). From this point of view, extremism in East Africa emerges as a consequence of ideology and underdevelopment.

There exists a significant presence of religious belief systems in conflict economies in East Africa, which interrelate with the informal economy, the resource extraction economy, the flow of illicit money, and the smuggling of goods across borders. Religion and its associated narrative identities could become linked with the survival mechanisms of the

respective communities, especially in situations where the role of the state is negligible and the informal economies are prevalent. Instead of merely constituting spiritual belief systems, religion itself might become part of a broader framework justifying actions in terms of conflict economy. This would happen through the use of religion as a means of legitimating economic and social activities (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Reno, 2011).

From an IPE perspective, one can see that the conflicts in such instances are not ideological alone but are also economically motivated. The ideological nature of the conflicts lies in the fact that religion is used to legitimate the real intentions of the people who engage in the conflicts.

Religion may be exploited by militant organizations and political entrepreneurs in the case of friable states in order to mobilize, discipline, or exploit the local populations economically. It serves to support the IPE idea of ideologies and identities serving as tools in the concrete world of accumulation and distribution of wealth by the creation of conflict economies in the intersections of poor governance, scarcity of resources, and international crime networks (Duffield, 2014; Keen, 2012).

4.4. Dual Nature of Religion in Conflict and Political Economy Contexts: Stability and Destabilization

In East Africa, religion has a dual nature in the context of conflict and political economy, which sees it both act as a stabilizer and destabilizer, depending on the extent to which religion has been politicized by various organizations or individuals. When acting as a stabilizer, the role of religious institutions and personalities is key in promoting peace, reconciliation, and unity within communities, particularly where state institutions are weak or contested. With the high moral standing that comes with religion, religious institutions can help mediate various conflicts, negotiate between competing parties, and aid in reconstructing post-conflict societies. In Kenya, South Sudan, Uganda, and DRC, religious personalities have led negotiations of conflicts and transitional justice processes.

Similarly, religion may act as a disruptive force when embedded in the competitive political economy and conflicting identity politics. In this case, the narratives of religion are used as a means of justification for exclusionary politics, violence, and radical ideologies, particularly when there is socio-economic inequality, failure of governance, and alienated youths. The narrative of the religious identity may be used by the state and non-state actors to justify their political domination, recruitment of their members, or description of their adversaries ideologically through moral or existential perspective.

This has been seen in some parts of the Horn of Africa and coastal Kenya where the extremist movements have utilized the socio-economic grievances of the masses for recruitment purposes. Under the International Political Economy theory, the above scenario is neither an intrinsic property of religion nor its doctrines but rather the structure of the placement of religion within the unequal distribution of resources and governance system.

5. Conclusion

Religion constitutes an integral element in the analysis of the political economy of conflicts in East Africa, existing in the junction between the state system, inequity, and identity construction. Rather than just being a cultural/ideological phenomenon standing outside the realm of material realities of weak states, disparities, and conflict over power, it constitutes one of the institutions involved in this complex system. In the specific case of the four countries considered here – Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo – religion becomes an important tool for escalating and/or reducing conflicts in combination with structural inequalities. The importance of religious rhetoric in modern politics, especially where state capacity is limited, has been identified by Haynes (2013).

From an IPE perspective, the interconnection between religion and conflict areas entails issues of resource allocation and exclusion, including political exclusion. Issues of inequality, in particular youth unemployment, regional marginalization, and exclusion from the resources offered by the state, can become conducive to situations where religious rhetoric works as an instrument of inclusion and protest. In this situation, religion no longer acts simply as a mirror of conflict but as its mediator through institutional means.

One can clearly see this in the view provided by Fox in 2008 whereby religion tends to connect to the political economy structures. It is therefore evident that when one uses an IPE perspective on religion, one will gain a great deal of knowledge about how religion is not simply about ideology but instead is a power system. This is because religion acts as an authorizing force, organizational body, and distribution system in the conflict economics. From Philpott, Shah, and Toft (2011), religion acts as a cause of conflicts as well as the potential basis of peace in international relations

depending on the institutional and economic environment it operates in. Therefore, this is where the importance of religion in the analysis of IPE in East Africa arises.

References

- [1] Berger, P. L. (2010). *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*.
- [2] Bompani, B. (2010). Religion and development in sub-Saharan Africa: An introduction. *Development in Practice*, 20(4–5), 611–620.
- [3] Casanova, J. (1994). *Public Religions in the Modern World*. University of Chicago Press.
- [4] Clarke, G., & Jennings, M. (2008). Development, civil society and faith-based organizations: Bridging the sacred and the secular. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [5] Deneulin, S., & Bano, M. (2009). *Religion in development: Rewriting the secular script*. Zed Books.
- [6] Deneulin, S., & Rakodi, C. (2011). Revisiting religion: Development studies thirty years on. *World Development*, 39(1), 45–54.
- [7] Fox, J. (2008). *A World Survey of Religion and the State*. Cambridge University Press.
- [8] Fox, J., & Sandler, S. (2004). *Bringing Religion into International Relations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [9] Fraser, N. (2013). *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. Verso.
- [10] Gilpin, R. (2001). *Global Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- [11] Green, E. (2015). The political economy of nation formation in modern Tanzania: Explaining stability in the face of diversity. Cambridge University Press.
- [12] Habermas, J. (2008). Notes on a post-secular society. *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25(4), 17–29.
- [13] Haynes, J. (2007). *Religion and development: Conflict or cooperation?* Palgrave Macmillan.
- [14] Hurd, E. S. (2008). *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*. Princeton University Press.
- [15] Philpott, D., Shah, T. S., & Toft, M. D. (2011). *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- [16] Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- [17] Strange, S. (1996). *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [18] Ter Haar, G., & Ellis, S. (2006). The role of religion in development: Towards a new relationship between the European Union and Africa. *The European Journal of Development Research*, 18(3), 351–367.
- [19] Thomas, S. M. (2005). *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [20] Thomas, S. M. (2005). *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.