

VOLUME IV
ISSUES II–III
2025

R/D

Religion & Development

BRILL | SCHÖNINGH

EDITORIAL

Philipp Öhlmann, Jennifer Philippa Eggert and Olufunke Adeboye
Religion and Development in Times of Global Crises 133

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Aadil Hussain Wagay and Ghulam Nabi
Empowering Communities: the Impact of *Waqf* on Social and Economic Development 145

Séverine Deneulin, Maria Paula Barrera and Luiz Felipe Lacerda
Faith Communities and Socio-Environmental Conflicts in Latin America 163

Titilayo Lydia Bamidele and Seun Bamidele
Rethinking Religion in Development: Faith, Power, and the Politics of the Sustainable Development Goals 191

Elorm Ama Stiles-Ocran
A Web of Underlying Drivers of Intimate Partner Violence Among African Women in a Christian Congregation in Ghana 213

BOOK REVIEWS

Carole Rakodi, Religious Organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia: Connections to Society and the State 253
Reviewed by Edward Churchill Orsmond

David Kuria Mbote, Barbara Bompani, Adriaan van Klinken, and Damaris Parsitau, Stories of Change: Religious Leaders and LGBTQ Inclusion in East Africa 256
Reviewed by Hanzline R. Davids

Religion & Development



Religion & Development is published in collaboration with the International Network on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (www.in-rcsd.org).

Aims and Scope

Religion & Development publishes peer reviewed research and analyses in the emerging field of religion and development. It seeks to foster critical investigation of the intersection of religion and development in global perspective. The journal is transdisciplinary and welcomes contributions from across the humanities and social sciences as well as reflections from policy and practice.

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Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

Religion & Development (print ISSN 2750-7947, online ISSN 2750-7955) is published 3 times a year by Brill, Plantijnstraat 2, 2321 JC Leiden, The Netherlands, tel +31 (0)71 5353500, fax +31 (0)71 5317532.

Subscription Rates

The electronic version of this journal is available in Open Access. Institutional customers can subscribe to the print version of Volume 5 (2026, 3 issues) at EUR 375 / USD 431. Individual customers can subscribe to the print version at EUR 125 / USD 144. Please check our website at brill.com/rnd.

All prices are exclusive of VAT (not applicable outside the EU) but inclusive of shipping & handling.

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Religion and Development in Times of Global Crises

Editorial

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Published online 2 June 2026

Abstract

This editorial introduces *Religion & Development* Volume 4, Issue 2/3. One central theme of the articles is that they all address different aspects of current global crises. They do so explicitly or implicitly, each from a different perspective and with a different approach. In terms of regional spread, the articles take us from Latin America to sub-Saharan Africa, while in terms of religious traditions they relate to Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, amongst others. The articles provide important reflections on the field of the study of religion and development from different angles and with different focal points. The editorial includes editors' notes.

Keywords

conflict – environment – Islam and development – Latin America – power – *Waqf*

1 Introducing *Religion & Development* Vol. 4, Issue 2/3

It is our pleasure to introduce the most recent issue of *Religion & Development* and provide an insight into the issue's content in this editorial. For technical reasons, we have decided to combine Issues 2 and 3 into one, and hence this issue is technically a double issue.

It is widely recognised that we live in a time of multiple crises. Global political instability and wars, climate change, environmental destruction and economic instability are just some of the crises that dominate our headlines. One common thread of the articles in this issue of *Religion & Development* is that they relate to the theme of contemporary crises, each in its own right, some explicitly and some implicitly. One important contemporary crisis, which often does not make it into the daily headlines, is the global crisis of gender-based violence, to which this issue's article by Elorm Ama Stiles-Ocran relates with a focus on intimate partner violence in Ghana. Another fundamental crisis of our time, the ecological crisis, is the topic of the article by Séverine Deneulin, Maria Paula Barrera and Luiz Felipe Lacerda, which engages with the struggle to preserve livelihoods in the Brazilian and Colombian Amazon. An even less often covered crisis, which, however, is nonetheless illustrative of fundamental global changes, is the crisis of secularist development approaches, which is a point of contention in the article by Titilayo Lydia Bamidele and Seun Bamidele. Recently, global political trends have led to a crisis in development funding, with far-reaching consequences for many of the sector's international structures. In line with this, the article by Aadil Hussain Wagay and Ghulam Nabi examines whether Islamic endowment, *Waqf*, can play a more prominent role in supporting sustainable development. Finally, the books in the review section also relate to themes of crises, be it through the provision of social welfare by religious communities in Africa and Asia (Rakodi 2024) or the role of religious leaders in the inclusion of LGBTIQ communities in East Africa (Mbote et al. 2024).

2 The Contents of this Issue

In the first article of the issue, "Empowering Communities: The Impact of *Waqf* on Social and Economic Development", Aadil Hussain Wagay and Ghulam

Nabi discuss the role of *Waqf* (Islamic endowment) on sustainable development. Drawing on Arabic and English language sources, they make the case for *Waqf* as a “viable, ethical and inclusive model for sustainable resource management and community development”. After introducing the concept of *Waqf* to the uninitiated reader, the authors provide an overview of its use as a “catalyst for social and economic progress in the past”. Starting from the time of the Prophet Muhammad [pbuh] and the *Khulāfa-i-Rāshidūn* (Rightly Guided Caliphs) to the Umayyad, Abbasid and Ottoman eras, Wagay and Nabi outline how deeply ingrained into Muslim societies *Waqf* used to be, advancing social welfare, infrastructure, the economy and even military campaigns. The authors then turn their attention to the current day and discuss the use of *Waqf* in societies as diverse as Australia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and the UK. They cite sources estimating the global value of *Waqf* assets to be between USD 100 billion and 1 trillion, highlighting the potential impact the strategic use of *Waqf* could have on sustainable development efforts.

English language academic debates on religion and development have often been dominated by publications focusing on the Christian context. The article by Wagay and Nabi therefore makes an important contribution to the extension of religion and development debates to other faiths, providing a concrete example of how secular development systems could potentially learn from faith-based development approaches. At a time when some Western funding sources have recently dried up, and interest in alternative approaches is on the rise, this is a timely article for both the religion and development field and development studies more broadly.

The issue's second research article, “Faith Communities and Socio-Environmental Conflicts in Latin America”, is written by Séverine Deneulin, Maria Paula Barrera and Luiz Felipe Lacerda. It engages with the field of religion and development through the lived perspectives and practices of local faith communities, showing that religion constitutes a dynamic framework through which communities interpret, contest and reshape dominant development narratives from below. The article draws on two comparative case studies situated in the Latin American context, the El Nopal oil block in Colombia and the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam in Brazil, and the mobilisation by local communities against these large-scale, environmentally destructive infrastructure projects. Methodologically, the study is based on in-depth qualitative empirical field research with local community representatives. When juxtaposing the models of development undergirding the infrastructure projects and the locally led mobilisation against them, it emerges that they are almost diametrically opposed: the infrastructure projects exemplify an extractivist, industrial model of development clashing with local livelihoods. The local communities' notions of development mobilisation, on the other hand, are grounded

in exactly these livelihoods and seek forms of development that are inclusive of notions of ecological sustainability. This is illustrated, for instance, by their care “for the life of water, and for the life of the humans and non-humans who depend on it”.

Deneulin, Barrera and Lacerda’s study has important implications for the wider field of the study of religion and development, arguing that “rerouting part of the religion and development field towards a social and environmental justice agenda that is inclusive of a faith dimension is urgently required”. By emphasising the relationality of human and non-human life, inclusive of both religion and environment emerging from the local context, the authors exemplify a hermeneutical approach of “lived development”, as recently proposed by Öhlmann et al.:

Moving beyond the dominant paradigms of global development, this consequently raises the question how development is conceptualised, enacted and practised on the ground – i.e. how development is lived. This concerns not least the question what is seen as desirable lives for individuals, communities, societies and the world as a whole. And it is precisely at this point where lived religion and lived development intersect. (Öhlmann et al. 2025, 21)

Deneulin, Barrera and Lacerda’s article thereby opens up important pathways of further engagement in the field.

This resonates very well with the third research article in the issue, by Titilayo Lydia Bamidele and Seun Bamidele. Their contribution titled “Rethinking Religion in Development: Faith, Power, and the Politics of the Sustainable Development Goals” takes a critical perspective on the current state of the religion and development debate and “foregrounds religion as a dynamic site of social transformation and examines the diverse ways religious traditions and networks mobilize values, resources, and collective action toward sustainable futures”. The authors draw on the important conceptual contributions of the past years, for instance by Deneulin and Bano (2009) and Tomalin (2018, 2020), to reflect on the implications of the field of tension between religious actors in development and the hitherto dominant secularist development agendas. In so doing, it takes up van Wensveen’s (2011) call to engage with religion and development in an “integrative pattern” that is cognisant of the normative notions of development emerging from religious communities and does not see religious infrastructure as a mere vehicle for secular development agendas – while at the same time being mindful of the complex and contested as well as ambiguous and at times conflictive role of religion. The authors emphasise

the historic “marginalization of religion” in the development debate and place it in a history of secular discourse beginning with the Enlightenment and its continuities in contemporary neoliberal paradigms. A particular value of the article is that it provides a broad overview of these debates and illustrates them in different religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. The article thereby provides a sound overview of the state of the art in the field and offers many starting points for further engagement.

Elorm Ama Stiles-Ocran, in the fourth research article, titled “A Web of Underlying Drivers of Intimate Partner Violence Among African Women in a Christian Congregation in Ghana”, focuses on domestic crises. Even though an African case is studied, the central issue discussed here has a global resonance. The study explores the factors responsible for intimate partner violence among Anlo-Ewe Christian women in a Protestant Church in southern Ghana. Several underlying causes were uncovered in the study. These included gendered socio-cultural norms of masculinity that empower men to control women in very extreme ways that normalise intimate partner violence, and Christian theologies that normalise marital hardships as a cross to be borne with faith, stigmatise divorce, and over-spiritualise domestic tensions. There is also the modern contractual perspective of the brideprice as legal tender that reduces a wife to a commodity or a “slave” who can be oppressed with impunity. The article exposes the weaknesses of existing social support systems, namely government-instituted formal support units, and the informal support from family, friends and churches. The research further uncovers the deficiencies of the support available to victims of intimate partner violence in the Protestant Church studied. These include poor-quality counselling and breaches of confidentiality. A key argument of the study is the ambiguity of the Protestant Church in offering support to the victims while inadvertently generating conditions that allow the problem to fester within its jurisdiction. The article concludes by encouraging social actors, such as the Church and other agents, to be more self-reflexive and sensitive in their interventions. This could assist the gradual eradication of intimate partner violence, especially within Church settings.

The issue is completed by the book review section curated by our book review editor Barbara Bompani, which contains two insightful reviews. Edward Churchill Orsmond reviewed Carole Rakodi’s book *Religious Organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia: Connections to Society and the State* (Rakodi 2024) and Hanzline R. Davids reviewed *Stories of Change: Religious Leaders and LGBTIQ Inclusion in East Africa*, by David Kuria Mbote, Barbara Bompani, Adriaan van Klinken and Damaris Parsitau (Mbote et al. 2024).

3 From the Editorial Desk

As has become customary, we close the editorial with a few notes from the journal's editorial desk. One important topic we, as likely anyone in the academic space, have increasingly engaged with is the impact of artificial intelligence and how to deal with the use of AI in research, writing and publication processes. *Religion & Development* is, of course, embedded in the policies on AI by our publisher, De Gruyter Brill, which recognises both the opportunities and challenges:

Generative AI technologies are changing the way we use and retrieve information and knowledge. At De Gruyter Brill, we are confident that artificial intelligence brings opportunities to further our mission of increasing the visibility, discoverability, and impact of academic research. At the same time, we are aware of the challenges and risks that come with the advances in generative AI technologies. (<https://brill.com/page/509467>)

Taking this a step further, we have begun a discussion amongst the journal's editorial committee to develop an approach to AI specifically tailored to *Religion & Development*, not only reflecting on the use of AI as such but also recognising its wider impact on research and publishing. This process will continue over the coming months with the aim of eventually developing a revised version of our author guidelines in light of the increasing use, and potential, of AI.

A second note from the editorial desk relates to the journal's finances. We sometimes receive questions from authors – or potential future authors – regarding the article processing charges set by our publisher. We believe it is important to understand why these charges exist in the first place. *Religion & Development* is published in full open access. Each article is available immediately upon publication, free of charge with a broad open access licence (CC-BY) that allows for maximum dissemination and free sharing. Yet, the production of a quality publication like *Religion & Development* also comes with significant costs. Each manuscript is thoroughly copyedited and professionally typeset. Authors receive proofs at each stage in the process until the final version is ready for publication. The significant amount of time our copyeditors and production editors spend on the article needs to be acknowledged. Then there is the technical infrastructure, for instance the Editorial Manager, our editorial management system, the journal websites and long-term archiving services. Finally, we provide social media coverage for each published article on Facebook (www.facebook.com/religionanddevelopment) and LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/religion-development/>) to increase the

recognition of the authors, skilfully done by our editorial assistant, Esther Mazengera. Our Editorial Committee, our Editorial Board and all reviewers work on a voluntary basis; however, there are some running costs which *Religion & Development*, like any academic journal, needs to cover in order to be able to function.

As an independent journal of the International Network on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development, *Religion & Development* is not backed financially by an institution. Hence, we are dependent on the contribution of authors to the running costs of the journal. However, it has been our policy from the very beginning that no one should be kept from publishing in the journal because of the fees. Therefore, we reiterate our commitment to

a solidarity model based on article processing charges. In some parts of the world, financing for open access publication is increasingly available, be it through specific open access funds, from project budgets or through institutional support. Those scholars that have access to such funding will be required to pay article processing charges for their articles. At the same time, it is the journal's firm policy that these costs should not be a hindrance for anyone wanting to publish in the journal. For those authors that are not able to pay the full article processing charges or who are not able to finance article processing charges at all, the article processing charges can be substantially reduced or waived. We are confident that this model will ensure the free dissemination of knowledge while at the same time facilitating the long-term economic sustainability of the journal. (Öhlmann et al. 2022, 15)

We therefore strongly encourage anyone interested in submitting their work to *Religion & Development* to do so. Should there be any questions regarding our solidarity-based article processing charges model, please do feel free to contact us.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the authors of the articles in this issue, as well as the numerous peer reviewers, for their important contribution to the journal and the field. As always, we greatly appreciate the excellent collaboration with our publisher Brill, particularly acquisitions editor Izaak de Hulster and production editor Sherry Yumul. Special thanks are furthermore owed to our editorial assistant, Esther Mazengera, and our copyeditor, Daniel Ross.

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Research Articles





Empowering Communities: the Impact of *Waqf* on Social and Economic Development

Research Article

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Received 9 July 2024 | Accepted 21 August 2025 |

Published online 14 October 2025

Abstract

The study examines the concept of *Waqf* (Islāmic Endowment), its historical origins and foundational principles, highlighting its role in providing social, educational and charitable services. It also evaluates the contemporary relevance of *Waqf*, its status in various countries and its effectiveness in addressing development challenges. The core research question guiding this study is, how can the strategic management of *Waqf* assets contribute to sustainable social and economic development in contemporary societies. The findings indicate that *Waqf* assets represent a substantial reservoir of wealth, which holds significant potential for addressing a range of societal challenges. By synthesising historical insights with modern practices, the paper illustrates how the strategic management and development of *Waqf* assets can yield substantial social and economic benefits, thereby affirming its ongoing relevance and utility in the global context.

Keywords

Waqf – Qurʾān – Ḥadīth – community development – poverty alleviation

1 Introduction

Islām, as a complete way of life, encourages philanthropy and compassion. These values are deeply embedded in Islāmīc teachings and are considered essential aspects of a Muslim's faith and practice. The *Qurʾān* and the Ḥadīth (Traditions of Prophet Muḥammad [pbuh]) stress the importance of compassion and kindness towards all of God's creation. Islām teaches that helping those in need is a form of worship. Whether it's feeding the hungry, caring for orphans or supporting the sick, these acts are highly rewarded in Islām. Islām places a strong emphasis on community and social responsibility. Muslims are encouraged to work together to support each other, especially during times of difficulty (*Al Qurʾān* 2:261; 76:8–9; 2:177; 57:18 and 9:71).¹ These services not only make people feel safe but also exemplify steps leading to their development. These targets are met by utilising the Islāmīc institutions of *Zakāt* (obligatory charity) and *Waqf* (voluntary charity). Since the institution of *Zakāt* is outside the scope of the paper, only the role of the institution of *Waqf* in development both in the past and future will be discussed here.

The *Qurʾān* addresses various aspects that can be related to development, such as economic justice, social welfare, education and moral development. The *Qurʾān* also underlines the importance of economic justice, honesty and integrity in financial dealings, highlighting that wealth should be earned and used in lawful and ethical ways (*Al Qurʾān* 2:188). Believers must avoid unjustly taking others' wealth through theft, fraud or deceit. All transactions and business dealings should be lawful and consensual, promoting fairness and honesty in economic activities (*Al Qurʾān* 2:29). Islām is in favour of sustainable development and environmental preservation. Islām emphasises the conservation of the earth and its resources. Believers are advised to avoid excess in their consumption and to act responsibly without causing harm or corruption to the environment (*Al Qurʾān* 2:205; 7:31). In addition, Islām encourages hard work and productivity, reminding believers that their actions are observed by

1 This concept is derived from various verses that collectively emphasise the importance of charity, kindness and social responsibility. The verses collectively highlight the importance of philanthropy, compassion and contributing positively to the community, encapsulating the broader teachings of Islām on these virtues.

Allah and the community surrounding them. It encourages Muslims to strive diligently in their endeavours, knowing they will ultimately be accountable to Allah for their deeds (*Al Qur'ān* 9:105).

Adequate funding is essential for improving a country's position on development indicators, especially in education, health and infrastructure. In the context of Islāmic civilisation, the institution of *Waqf* has historically provided and continues to provide financial support for these sectors. *Waqf* has played a crucial role in the past in fostering communities' development. Given its contemporary financial potential across the world, *Waqf* can catalyse societal development beyond religious considerations. So, the study is an attempt to highlight how the strategic management of *Waqf* assets can contribute to sustainable social and economic development in today's world.

The paper begins with an introduction, followed by the literature review in section 2 and the research methodology in section 3. A concise overview of the meaning and historical evolution of *Waqf* is given in section 4. Section 5 of the paper discusses the historical role of *Waqf* in development and social welfare. Section 6 explores the contemporary potential of *Waqf* and its possible role in mitigating modern societal challenges. Finally in section 7, a discussion and conclusion are given.

2 Literature Review

The existing literature on *Waqf* reflects a multidimensional approach, encompassing historical, jurisprudential, socio-economic and managerial perspectives. Rather than merely recounting institutional evolution, recent scholarship increasingly interrogates the strategic relevance of *Waqf* in contemporary development discourse. Three major thematic currents emerge in the literature: the historical and legal foundations of *Waqf*, its socio-economic and developmental potential and the institutional and governance challenges it faces today.

2.1 *Historical and Jurisprudential Foundations*

Several scholars explore the doctrinal roots and formative history of *Waqf*, tracing its evolution from Prophetic traditions to classical Islamic jurisprudence. Hennigan (2004) and Abbasi (2012) delve into the foundational writings of jurists, outlining the theological and legal contours that undergird the institution. Gil (1998), meanwhile, discusses early sectarian debates, particularly the Fadak controversy, to highlight the role of *Waqf* in contested narratives of Islāmic political history. Nor and Mohamad (2023) further contextualise *Waqf*

as a vital institution in medieval Islamic society, reinforcing its legacy in community building and resource redistribution.

While these studies are rich in textual analysis, they often understate the administrative innovations that took place during transitional political phases – most notably during the Umayyad period. This remains an overlooked area, despite being crucial to understanding the early institutionalisation of *Waqf* under state authority.

2.2 *Socio-Economic Role and Development Potential*

A strong body of literature positions *Waqf* as a mechanism for equitable development, particularly in Muslim majority and minority contexts. Zuki (2012), Budiman and Kusuma (2011) and Bin Man and Abdulwaheed (2011) argue that *Waqf* has historically contributed to social welfare through education, healthcare and infrastructure. These authors view *Waqf* as a precursor to modern public welfare systems, one that aligns spiritual and material development. Hasan, Hassan and Rashid (2019) show how *Waqf* institutions in Malaysia supported educational stability during economic downturns, while Shaikh, Ismail and Shafiai (2017) emphasise its relevance for poverty alleviation in underdeveloped Muslim nations.

In the South Asian context, Alam (2018), Abdullah (2020) and Rashid (2007; 2018) highlight the underperformance of *Waqf* in India despite its asset-rich profile. These works trace the gap between potential and performance back to bureaucratic mismanagement, legal ambiguity and lack of political will. Fauzia, Mostowlansky and Yehya (2018) provide a broader regional lens, particularly focusing on how Asian Muslim societies have negotiated the role of *Waqf* in modern nation-states.

However, these studies tend to address *Waqf*'s developmental role from a macro-perspective, often without comparative analysis of how its potential varies across legal and governance models in different countries. This research attempts to fill that void by juxtaposing historical success stories (e.g. the Ottoman and Umayyad eras) with contemporary underutilisation (e.g. India and Indonesia), offering a cross-temporal perspective on institutional performance.

2.3 *Legal, Institutional and Governance Dimensions*

Governance challenges emerge as a major theme in recent literature. Usman and Rahman (2020) highlight the divergence in performance between private and public *Awqāf* (plural of *Waqf*) in Pakistan, attributing efficiency to less state intervention in private setups. Sukmana (2020) and Lamido and Haneef (2021) argue for greater institutional accountability, transparency and strategic vision

in aligning *Waqf* assets with global development goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Alias et al. (2022) add a jurisprudential dimension to the governance debate, calling for a paradigm shift from traditional *Waqf* towards “productive *Waqf*,” capable of sustainable revenue generation and socio-economic transformation.

The issue of institutional decay is a recurring concern. Kasdi et al. (2022) and Wani (2023) stress the importance of capacity-building, legal reform and community participation in improving asset management. Sabrina (2014), through her study of digital *fatāwā* (legal rulings), reveals the diverse interpretations and ongoing redefinitions of *Waqf* in light of modernity and globalisation.

Although these works offer critical insights into the structural challenges facing *Waqf*, they have not adequately explored the potential of *Waqf* assets in the contemporary era. Additionally, these studies predominantly focus on specific regions, such as India, Pakistan and Malaysia, without simultaneously addressing the medieval Muslim world and the contemporary era. Notably, the role and significance of Umayyad *Waqf* have been largely overlooked in the existing body of research. Consequently, this study aims to bridge these gaps by explicitly focusing on the potential of *Waqf* assets in the contemporary era while simultaneously considering the historical context of the medieval Muslim world. So, the study will specifically focus on the often-overlooked role and significance of the Umayyad *Waqf*, providing a more comprehensive understanding of its historical and contemporary implications.

3 Research Methodology

The key objectives of this paper are threefold. First, it seeks to explore the concept of *Waqf*, including its meaning, purpose and foundational principles. Second, it aims to highlight the historical importance of *Waqf* in delivering social services and in supporting educational, charitable and welfare initiatives. Third, the paper endeavours to examine the contemporary relevance and potential of *Waqf* institutions across various countries in addressing present-day development challenges.

To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a qualitative research design. This approach is well-suited to analysing the historical, conceptual and contextual dimensions of *Waqf*, as well as its broader societal implications (Bryman 2012). In addition, the study employs a descriptive, historical and analytical methodology. This framework facilitates the systematic description and analysis of both historical records and present-day practices. It also enables an in-depth examination of the economic potential of *Waqf* in contributing to social and economic development (Kothari and Garg 2019).

4 *Waqf*: Principles, Structure and Historical Significance

The root meaning of the term *Waqf* is to stop, block, suspend (Dallh 2023), detain or hold (Abbasi 2012). Technically, *Waqf* means the donation of a revenue-generating property such that the principal asset is preserved and its revenue is distributed among the predetermined beneficiaries (*Aḥbis aṣlahā wa sabbil thamaratahā* (Sunan an-Nasāi 3605) or *'In shi'ta ḥabbasta aṣlahā wataṣaddaḡta bihā* (Ṣaḥīḥ al Bukhārī 2772)). In other words, *Waqf* stands for restricting *Waqf* assets from engaging in any commercial transactions, while its benefits are dedicated to charitable purposes (Dallh 2023). To further elucidate the statement mentioned above, consider the example of a fruit-bearing tree designated as *Waqf* for specified beneficiaries, such as the hungry or those in need. In this scenario, the tree itself is preserved while its fruits are distributed among the beneficiaries. Thus, the *Waqf* system addresses the needs of the disadvantaged in a sustainable manner by ensuring the continuity of the asset while utilising its yields for charitable purposes. The organisational structure of a *Waqf* involves the following four major parties (Abdullah 2020):

Wāqif (Founder): The person who initiates the *Waqf* by formally dedicating his/her property to benefit specific beneficiaries.

Mawqūf 'alayh (Beneficiaries): Those who receive the benefits of the *Waqf*.

Mutawallī (Administrator): The individual tasked with overseeing the *Waqf*'s management based on the founder's stipulations.

Mawqūf bihī (Subject matter): Refers to the property or asset that is endowed as *Waqf*. In order to be a valid *Waqf*, Mawqūf bihī has to adhere to three following fundamental conditions (Abbasi 2012):

Perpetuity: Means that the endowment is intended to last indefinitely.

Irrevocability: Means once a *Waqf*, always a *Waqf*. The founder cannot reclaim the endowed property or revoke it.

Inalienability: Means what belongs to *Waqf* belongs to God; hence, the *Waqf* asset cannot be sold, transferred or inherited. It is permanently dedicated to its charitable purpose.

Waqf, a pivotal Islāmic institution, forms the bedrock of Islāmic civilisation and is intricately integrated into both the religious life and social economy of Muslims. Historically, it has played a fundamental role in supporting various aspects of society, including education, healthcare and infrastructure development, reflecting its deep connection with the values and practices of Islāmic

civilisation (Hennigan 2004). *Waqf*, a fundamental Islāmic institution, was instrumental in financing a wide range of public services, including mosques, schools, hospitals, markets and inns (Cizakca 1998). It provided a unique organisational framework under Islāmic law, distinct from other legal forms due to its lack of an impersonal juristic personality, making it particularly suited for sustaining long-term services. Consequently, before the emergence of the modern state in the twentieth century, the majority of public services in the Muslim world were managed through *Waqf* (Makdisi 1981).

Moreover, *Waqf* was not solely confined to public services. Many *Waqf* properties were designated for the benefit of the founders and their descendants, with provisions that extended across generations. Even in these private *Waqf* arrangements, the ultimate beneficiaries were often the poor or public services, reflecting the institution's dual role in serving both private and public interests. Thus, *Waqf* encompasses both private and public functions, demonstrating its versatility and significance in Islāmic society (Abbasi 2012).

Waqf as an institution has also faced extensive scholarly critique, particularly regarding its legal and economic aspects. Criticisms from both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars focus on inefficiency, rigidity, corruption and its negative impact on economic development. Issues highlighted include its inflexibility during industrialisation, mismanagement, legal formalism and susceptibility to manipulation. Scholars emphasise the need for reforms to address founder rights, adaptability and resource misallocation. Furthermore, political agendas have exploited *Waqf* laws to delegitimise certain *Waqf*, portraying them as obstacles to modernisation and economic progress. Kuran (2011) is of the view that the rigidity of the *Waqf* institution contributed to the economic and organisational stagnation of the Middle East. While *Waqfs* addressed issues like wealth fragmentation, their inflexibility became a significant obstacle, particularly during industrialisation, which required the rapid reallocation of resources to adapt to new technologies. Gerber (2010) highlights that *Waqf* institutions in the Ottoman era were prone to mismanagement and corruption. He notes that *Waqf* administrators often exploited their positions for personal gain, undermining the original philanthropic intent. Schacht (1953) critiques the *Waqf* system for its rigid legal formalism, which impeded its adaptability and effectiveness in addressing evolving social and economic needs. Naim (2008) argues that the *Waqf* institution was susceptible to manipulation by individuals and state officials seeking to bypass shari'ah (Islāmic law) regulations. Gaudiosi (1988) says that the *Waqf* system faces challenges, including conflicts arising from insufficient income to meet beneficiary stipends and difficulties in understanding and applying *Waqf* laws due to limited and fragmented historical documentation. Kahf (2003) is of the view that the lack of

respect for the founder's conditions, especially when the *Waqf's* objectives become obsolete, can discourage the establishment of *Waqfs*. There is a need for contemporary *fiqh* (Islāmic Jurisprudence) and *Waqf* laws to address issues such as founder rights, the reversibility of *Waqf* decisions, and the adaptability of *Waqf* purposes to prevent misallocation of resources. Hallaq (2009) says that political and ideological agendas exploited the law of *Waqf*, introducing a distinction between family and public *Waqf* – previously absent in Muslim cultures – to delegitimise family *Waqf*. Nationalist elites, influenced by European Orientalists, argued that family *Waqf* were post-formative developments and impeded modern economic progress by tying up property. This critique positioned *Waqf* as an obstacle to modernisation and civilisation, aligning with broader colonial and nationalist narratives.

5 *Waqf*: a Catalyst for Social and Economic Progress in the Past

Waqf started with the Prophet Muḥammad's [pbuh] migration to Madīnah, with the mosque of Qubā as the first *Waqf* in Islām for religious services (Al-Ḥujailī 2019). The Holy Prophet [pbuh] exemplified the essence of selflessness and devotion to the welfare of others. By divesting himself of personal wealth and dedicating it entirely to the pleasure of Allah, he established a precedent for his followers (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 2904 and Ṣaḥīḥ al-Muslim 1757). He [pbuh] endowed seven of his valuable date orchards in Madīnah for charitable purposes, dedicating them as *Waqf* to continuously benefit the community by providing food for the poor and resources for public welfare activities. It became the first real estate *Waqf* of Prophet [pbuh] (Al-Ḥujailī 2019).

Additionally, he dedicated his portion of the date orchards in Khandaq and Khaybar, which are known for their fertile land and abundant date production. The revenue from these orchards supported various social and religious causes, reflecting the Prophet's commitment to using his resources for the betterment of the community (Topbas 2009). In the early days of Islām, *Waqf* assets were also used to finance military campaigns by providing logistics, hence caring for the religious, political and economic needs of the early Muslims (Al-Waqidi 2011).

The prophetic period was followed by the era of Khulāfa-i-Rāshidūn (Rightly Guided Caliphs), who all established *Awqāf* for services of different kinds such as economic, political, social, etc. They were joined by other companions of the Prophet [pbuh], including those from the Battle of Badr, the Muhājirūn (Emigrants) and the Ansār (Helpers) who established *Waqf* from their earnings. In fact, the era of the Khulāfa-i-Rāshidūn was an exemplary Islāmic period

marked by extensive charitable activities with a focus on development and social service to people (Baqutayan et al. 2018). The two most important *Awqāf* in early Islāmic history established by companions of the Prophet [pbuh] are the land of Khaybar by ‘Umar ibn al Khattāb and the well of Rūmah by ‘Uthman Ibn ‘Affān. The Prophetic tradition pertaining to the land of Khaybar is an essential Ḥadīth as far as the validity of the institution of *Waqf* is concerned. When ‘Umar acquired a valuable piece of land in Khaybar, he sought guidance from the Prophet Muḥammad [pbuh]. The Prophet [pbuh] advised him to dedicate the land as a charitable endowment, ensuring that it would neither be sold, given as a present, nor bequeathed. Instead, its yield would be used for various charitable purposes such as supporting the poor, assisting relatives, emancipating enslaved people, funding military expeditions and aiding guests and travellers. The administrator of the endowment was permitted to benefit from it reasonably without the intention of personal enrichment. It demonstrates the Islāmic principles of charity, social welfare and the ethical management of wealth (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 2772).

Moreover, the donation of the well of Madīnah, known as Bīr-e-Rūmah, by ‘Uthmān exemplifies Islāmic charitable practices and community welfare. Initially owned by a Jewish man who charged high prices, the well caused hardship for the people of Madīnah. ‘Uthmān purchased the well for a significant sum and dedicated it as a public *Waqf*, which ensured that everyone had free access to water, alleviating the community’s water scarcity. This generous act by ‘Uthmān highlights his commitment to public welfare and embodies Islāmic values of charity and social responsibility (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 2778).

The dedication of resources as *Waqf* by the Prophet Muḥammad [pbuh] and his companions had far-reaching positive effects on the Madīnian community, fostering social welfare, economic development, ethical wealth management and community solidarity. The *Waqf* of valuable resources, such as date orchards and wells, provided continuous support for the poor and needy, ensuring essential resources like food and water were accessible to everyone, thus reducing poverty and hardship. The establishment of *Waqf* created sustainable charitable institutions that continued to benefit the community over time, supporting various social and religious causes and creating a lasting legacy of charity and welfare. Additionally, the endowments supported economic activities by providing resources for public welfare, including financing military campaigns (Sunan an-Nasāi 2464) and other communal needs, aiding in the economic development of early Muslim society.

During the Umayyad period, the first dynasty of Islām, religious *Waqf* primarily existed in the form of mosques. However, *Waqf* also extended to other services, including education, healthcare, residential provisions and drinking

water services. This era marked the institutionalisation of *Waqf*, where its management was overseen at the state level, resulting in a significant shift in the oversight and administration of *Awqāf*. One of the most instrumental figures in this context was qādī (Justice) Tawba Ibn Namīr, who served as the Mutawallī (Administrator) of *Awqāf* in Egypt during the reign of ‘Abd al Mālik (Zahra 2005).

Mu‘āwiyah I, the founder of the Umayyad Caliphate, was recognised for his administrative and infrastructural reforms, notably the construction of canals to enhance public utilities and agricultural productivity. These included Nehr-i-Kizāma, Nehr-i-Azrq and Nehr-i-Shuhadā, which improved irrigation and crop yields. Mu‘āwiyah’s canal projects demonstrated his strategic vision for economic strengthening, transforming arid lands into fertile zones, ensuring food security and contributing to the caliphate’s prosperity (Ali 1997).

Walīd’s reign signifies a pinnacle of the Umayyad Caliphate’s commitment to social welfare, healthcare and infrastructure, demonstrating a progressive approach to public services and the support of vulnerable populations. His initiatives in establishing hospitals, educational provisions and traveller lodges reflect a holistic vision for societal well-being and sustainable development, marking his period as a golden era of Umayyad philanthropy and architectural achievement (Ali 1997). He also arranged for teachers to educate orphans and provided caretakers to assist blind individuals, extending these practices to support people with disabilities as well (Al Suyuti 2015).

The *Waqf* played a crucial role in cultural and educational advancement during the Abbasid Caliphate, often referred to as the Golden Age of Islāmic Civilisation. The significant development and expansion of the *Waqf* institution under the Abbasids facilitated the establishment and sustenance of numerous religious and educational institutions. These included universities and madāris (schools), which were instrumental in promoting learning, scholarship and community welfare. The state-supported endowments not only provided for religious edifices like mosques but also laid the foundation for some of the most prominent centres of learning in the Islāmic world, ensuring their financial stability and accessibility to students. This period saw the endowment of residential houses and shops in addition to a large number of religious *Awqāf*, such as mosques (Muhammad 2019). The Abbasid period can also be considered the Golden Period of *Waqf*, particularly with regard to the establishment of universities funded by these endowments. Notable examples include Al-Azhar, founded by the Fatimid General Jawhar al-Siqilli, and Dār al-Ḥikmah, founded by the Fatimid ruler Al-Ḥākim (Hitti 1970). Moreover, the famous Saljūq Minister Niẓām al-Mulk established the Madrasa-e-Niẓāmiyah in Baghdad (Naumani 2019). In Aleppo, numerous similar *madāris* were

established, including Madrasa-e-Sha'bāniyyah, Madrasa-e-'Uthmāniyyah, Madrasa-e-Khasrawiyyah, Madrasa-e-Ḥalāwibīn, Madrasa-e- Aşruniyah and Madrasa-e-Ḥalawiyah, all supported by substantial endowments. The second largest madrasah after Madrasa-e-Nizāmiyah was Madrasa-e-Mustānşiriyyah, founded by the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustanşir Billah. This institution provided students with free accommodation, food, oil and paper, funded by the endowment of hundreds of villages and other properties (Lock 2019).

Similarly, during the Caliphate of the Ottomans, *Waqf* offered a wide range of services, thereby helping people develop economically, socially, and intellectually (Naumani 2019). It is estimated that during the Ottoman Empire, about 75% of all arable land was allocated to endowments. Around 1925, the total value of these lands in modern Turkey was estimated to be 60 million Turkish pounds, highlighting the widespread prevalence of the endowment system during the Ottoman era (Dar 2022). So, the *Waqf* system during the Ottoman period reflects how deeply integrated it was in supporting public welfare and religious and educational institutions.

6 The Financial Potential of *Waqf*: Transforming Revenue into Community Development

The establishment and operation of *Awqāf* are prevalent in countries with significant Muslim populations. The presence of *Awqāf* is familiar, regardless of the legal and organisational frameworks within these countries. In some nations, like Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and India, *Awqāf* is backed by formal regulations and legal structures, which provide a structured and potentially more stable environment for their operation. In contrast, in countries such as South Africa (*Awqāf*South Africa²), the United Kingdom (International *Waqf* Fund³), Australia (*Awqāf* Australia⁴) and Canada (*Awqāf* Canada⁵), *Awqāf* function pri-

2 *Awqāf* South Africa empowers communities through innovative philanthropy. <https://awqafsa.org.za/#>.

3 The International *Waqf* Fund recognises the need for sustainable charity. The donations received are invested in shari'ah-compliant and low-risk investments. Then, the profits are used to fund a variety of projects every year. <https://Waqf.org/who-we-are/>.

4 *Awqāf* Australia is committed to acquiring assets to effect meaningful change within the Australian Muslim community. The endowments received are directly allocated to supporting education, alleviating poverty and assisting the homeless. <https://awqaf.org.au/>.

5 *Awqāf* Canada supports immigrants, refugees and ethnocultural communities in Canada by developing social enterprises and endowment projects. These initiatives aim to empower these groups to become effective contributors to Canadian society and nation-builders.

marily as organisations within the Muslim community, relying on communal support and private governance rather than state-backed regulations. This diversity in the establishment and management of *Awqāf* reflects the adaptability and resilience of the institution across various socio-political contexts, highlighting its importance and potential for contributing to community development and welfare in different settings.

Waqf asset pools are substantial. A 2019 joint report by the World Bank (WB), the International Centre for Education in Islamic Finance (INCEIF) and the International Shari'ah Research Academy for Islamic Finance (ISRA) on "Maximising Social Impact Through *Waqf* Solutions" estimated the global value of *Waqf* assets to be between USD 100 billion and USD 1 trillion (Aziz et al. 2019). These assets, if effectively utilised, have the potential to make a significant impact. For example, leveraging these *Waqf* assets could play a crucial role in addressing the annual USD 2.5 trillion funding gap for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Jensen and Rahman 2024). By strategically managing and deploying *Waqf* resources, it would be possible to support various social and developmental initiatives, thereby contributing to poverty alleviation, education, healthcare and other critical areas essential for sustainable development.

When we talk about the potential of *Awqāf* and the assets associated with it, India emerges as the most important country. Although Muslims constitute only about 14% of the population, there are about one million *Waqf* properties. The one million mark will be reached when usurped *Waqf* assets are identified and added to the *Waqf* Assets Management System of India portal (WAMSI). The potential of *Waqf* assets and the role they can play in uplifting the down-trodden sections of society by providing education, healthcare, livelihood opportunities, etc. can be understood from a government report from 2006, known as the Sachar Committee Report. According to the report:

India possesses a vast number of *Waqf* properties, with a market value significantly higher than their book value. There are more than 490,000 registered *Waqfs* in India. However, the current annual income from these properties is approximately Rs. 163 crores, yielding a meagre return of 2.7 per cent. Given that the book values of these properties are about half a century old, their current value can be safely estimated to be several times higher, with a market value of around Rs. 1.2 lakh crores (1,200 billion). If these properties are utilised efficiently and commercially, they could generate a minimum return of 10 per cent, equating to about Rs. 12,000 crores annually. It has been observed that where *Waqf* lands have been used efficiently, they have generated an average return of about 20 per cent. Therefore, it is evident that if some of these *Waqf* properties located

in prime areas across the country are developed and put to commercial use, their market value and annual income will increase significantly.

SACHAR COMMITTEE REPORT 2006, 219

It shows that the *Waqf* properties in India, while numerous and of significant market value, are currently underutilised, yielding a low return on investment. The disparity between the historical book value and the current market value indicates substantial untapped financial potential. Efficient and commercial use of these properties, especially those in prime locations, could dramatically enhance their market value and generate significantly higher annual returns. It underscores the need for strategic development and management of *Waqf* assets to maximise their economic impact. Moreover, such colossal revenue could mitigate a number of crises Indian society is currently facing. By leveraging the potential income from *Waqf* properties, significant advancements could be made in the areas of education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, economic development, disaster relief and emergency response and even environmental sustainability, leading to improved living conditions, economic growth and enhanced social welfare across India.

Keeping in view the figures mentioned above in the Indian context, where Muslims live as a minority, the status and potential of *Waqf* in Muslim majority countries could be much higher. The Indonesian *Waqf* Board (BWI) estimates that Indonesia's annual potential for cash *Waqf* is IDR 180 trillion (USD 13 billion annually). However, by January 2021, only Rp 238.83 billion had been collected. This significant disparity suggests that the potential for cash *Waqf* in Indonesia is still primarily untapped and has considerable room for growth (Faizi et al. 2021). Considering other forms of *Awqāf* beyond cash *Waqf*, the potential contributions could be significantly higher, especially given that cash *Waqf* is a relatively recent phenomenon. In contrast, the *Waqf* of real estate and other tangible assets has a long-standing historical precedent dating back to the Prophetic period.

While the precise number of *Awqāf* worldwide is not known, it is estimated to be at least 1.5 million, not including mosques, graveyards and similar properties. Among these, approximately 25,000–30,000 have the potential for development, which could generate hundreds of millions in revenue annually for welfare initiatives (Rashid 2018). This estimate is based on decades-old data, suggesting the actual number of *Awqāf* could be much higher. Consequently, the potential for generating funds and opportunities for societal development through *Awqāf* could be significantly greater.

The comparison between a historical case like the Umayyad or Ottoman Empire and contemporary examples such as India, Malaysia or Indonesia is crucial for understanding the financial potential of *Waqf*, as it reveals both the

institution's past success as a robust economic engine and its current underutilisation. Historically, *Waqf* funded essential infrastructure and social services on a vast scale, as seen in the Ottoman era, where up to 75% of arable land was endowed (Qadri 2024). In contrast, today's *Waqf* assets, despite being worth hundreds of billions globally, often yield minimal returns due to mismanagement, outdated systems or regulatory gaps, as illustrated by India's low 2.7% return (Sachar Committee Report 2006). These specific cases were chosen to contrast the historical zenith of *Waqf*'s financial role with modern efforts to reform and revitalise it through innovative governance, digitisation and integration with development goals. The comparison highlights how strategic reforms and lessons from history can help unlock *Waqf*'s dormant capacity to serve as a powerful tool for sustainable community development.

7 Discussion and Conclusion

The study has examined the socio-economic and financial impact of *Waqf* by tracing its historical evolution and analysing its contemporary relevance in selected countries. Our findings reinforce existing arguments (e.g. Zuki 2012; Budiman and Kusuma 2011) on *Waqf*'s development potential, while adding new perspectives by highlighting institutional decay in India and innovations in Malaysia and Indonesia. By revisiting the often-neglected Umayyad era, we also fill a critical historical gap in the literature (Nor and Mohamad 2023; Abbasi 2012). These insights call for renewed governance reforms and productive *Waqf* models in Muslim minority and majority contexts alike.

The research underscores the potential of *Waqf* as a transformative tool for addressing historical, social and economic challenges. It deepens understanding of its historical and modern relevance, thereby bridging interdisciplinary perspectives. Highlighting *Waqf* as an untapped resource, it emphasises its role in poverty alleviation, economic growth and sustainable development while showcasing its ability to enhance welfare, reduce societal inequalities and foster social cohesion. Additionally, it positions *Waqf* as a globally adaptable model for ethical and inclusive resource management, reaffirming its enduring utility in promoting community welfare and economic progress. The research also underscores the profound potential of *Waqf* as a transformative institution for promoting community welfare and driving economic development. By delving into its historical origins, foundational principles and societal contributions, the study reveals the enduring significance of *Waqf* in addressing social, educational and charitable needs. The findings highlight the substantial reservoir of wealth embedded in *Waqf* assets, emphasising their capacity to address contemporary challenges such as poverty, inequality and lack of

access to essential services. The study demonstrates that with strategic management and modernisation, these assets can be harnessed to yield significant social and economic benefits, bridging the gap between historical practices and modern development needs. In a global context, *Waqf* presents a viable, ethical and inclusive model for sustainable resource management and community development. Its adaptability across different countries and contexts reaffirms its relevance as a mechanism for fostering social cohesion, economic resilience and equitable growth. As the world faces increasing developmental challenges, the revitalisation of *Waqf* offers a promising pathway to addressing these issues sustainably. This study calls for further exploration and innovative strategies to modernise *Waqf* governance while preserving its core principles, ensuring it continues to serve as a powerful tool for global welfare and progress. The substantial potential of *Waqf* assets, if effectively managed and developed, can play a crucial role in enhancing social welfare and development across various regions.

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Faith Communities and Socio-Environmental Conflicts in Latin America

Research Article

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Received 14 November 2025 | Accepted 20 January 2026 |

Published online 20 February 2026

Abstract

The paper answers the call from within the field of religion and development to examine how local faith communities themselves understand development and what counts as desirable social change. It analyses how they contest government development narratives and how they construct their own narratives of social change in two cases of extractive and mega-infrastructure projects in the Colombian and Brazilian Amazon. It highlights how the actions of local faith communities in response to these projects are rooted in an understanding of faith that integrates relationships with God and connections with rivers and forests. Given this integration and contestation of development narratives, the paper argues for orienting the currently named religion and development research field towards a socio-environmental justice research agenda that is inclusive of a faith dimension.

Keywords

environmental justice – Latin America – Catholic Church – ecology – Amazonia

1 Introduction

As is very familiar with the readers of *Religion & Development*, it was not until the turn of the millennium that an academic literature on the topic began to appear.¹ The main rationale for the emergence of the religion and development research field has been highlighting the role of religion in development processes, something which had previously been neglected in academic and policy circles. The field has now moved beyond affirming the need for taking religion into account and has entered what Tomalin (2021) calls a new “reconstruction” phase.² She argues that this new phase needs “to move beyond prioritizing the agenda of secular global development institutions” (Tomalin 2021, 106). Instead, it needs to focus on local faith communities, and their goals and objectives. This call for greater localisation and attention to local religious and social dynamics has also been made recently in *Religion & Development* (Öhlmann and Wilkinson 2025).

A context that has been the mainstay of the religion and development field has been the interface between large faith-based development organisations and international donors on the one hand and local faith communities on the other. The field has mainly been concerned with how internationally agreed development objectives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, translate across secular and faith-based lines. It has however been little concerned so far with the disputes around the meaning of the concept of development itself at the local level.

1 See, among others, Bompani (2019), Clarke (2013), Clarke and Jennings (2007), Deneulin and Bano (2009), Deneulin and Rakodi (2011), Rakodi (2019), Swart and Nell (2016), Tomalin (2013, 2015), Tomalin, Haustein and Kidy (2019).

2 Tomalin (2021) identifies four phases of the religion and development field: 1) arguing for the field, which made the case for including religion in development research; 2) establishing the field, which saw the growth of academic research on the intersection between religion and development processes and outcomes; 3) deconstructing the field, which critiqued the instrumentalisation of religion for predetermined international development goals and the neglect of how religion was lived at the local community level; and finally 4) reconstructing the field.

At the core of the concept of development is the idea of betterment, or worthwhile social change. But views of what might count as “betterment” or “worthwhile change” have diverged greatly since development entered policy discourses in the 1950s, from development as economic growth and modernisation, to basic needs provision, guaranteeing human rights, sustainable development, human development and the Sustainable Development Goals, to name but a few.³ What counts as “betterment” or “development”, and which means bring about human flourishing and poverty reduction, has been a highly contested matter, not least in the area of infrastructure and natural resource extraction projects carried out in the name of development and improving people’s lives.

Latin America, and the Amazon region in particular, has been a site of contestations between clashing development narratives, with governments following a development path based on natural resource extraction (Gudynas 2021; Svampa 2019). This has led to high rates of deforestation (Humphreys-Bebbington et al. 2018), with the result that the region is now at risk of reaching a tipping point (Boulton et al. 2022). Those who have contested this extractivist vision of development have been accused of being “anti-development” (Bebbington et al. 2018). Their protest activities have been increasingly criminalised. Brazil and Colombia, and the Amazon region as a whole, are currently the most dangerous countries in which to be an environmental defender (Global Witness 2024).

The concept of “religion” is another essentially disputed concept, as the religion and development literature has highlighted (Deneulin and Bano 2009; Tomalin 2013). The literature now avoids an essentialist definition and takes a position according to the research subject and context (Fountain 2013), which is what this paper is doing. It uses the terminology of “faith communities” rather than the term “religion”. One reason is that, in their mobilisation against government development narratives, it was the concept of “faith”, or at times “spirituality”, which was appealed to, and not that of religion. Our research informants inextricably linked their relationship to God with their relationship to the Earth and the human and non-human life it contains as an interconnected whole, and which they referred to as “faith” or “spirituality”. Another reason was that maintaining a relationship to God (in the Latin origin of religion, *re-ligere*, to link with) was always linked to a community. As the two case studies in this paper will show, it was from that community soil that their

3 For the evolution of development thought, see, among others, Hettne (2009) and Unger (2018). For the value judgements involved in the concept of development, see Drydyk (2023).

actions sprang. The paper focuses on two aspects of faith communities that have been highlighted by the religion and development literature referenced above: 1) discourses, teachings, symbols, practices and rituals; 2) organisations which faith communities form or take part in.

We examine two case studies where faith communities and government development narratives have conflicted in the Amazon region. The first is the El Nogal oil block in the department of Caquetá in Colombia. The second is the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam in the state of Pará in Brazil. After some methodological considerations, we discuss each case study in a symmetrical structure. First we analyse how local faith communities root their mobilisation strategies in a diagnosis of their surrounding social and ecological realities that is grounded in their understanding of faith. This diagnosis is also embedded in community building. We then analyse how these faith communities mobilise around alternative development narratives, undertake protest, training and advocacy actions, and how they bridge the local, national and global levels. On the basis of our research findings, we highlight that local faith communities understand their actions in terms of defending life and territories, and based on their connection with rivers and forests which they see as inseparable from faith and their relationship with God. The paper therefore concludes that the currently named research field of religion and development could evolve towards a socio-environmental justice research agenda that includes a faith dimension, as it increasingly takes into account local faith communities' perspectives on "religion" and "development".

2 Methodological Background

In order to better understand the role faith communities play where extractive or mega-infrastructure projects have taken place in the name of development, our first step was to identify cases where faith actors have played a significant role in the mobilisation surrounding the project – these are often referred to as socio-environmental conflicts (Martínez-Alier 2023). After a preliminary data-gathering exercise, we conducted interviews with civil society actors in Brazil and Colombia to discuss fieldwork feasibility and security concerns. We then selected one case study in each country.

In Colombia, we selected the El Nogal oil block case in which the Vicaría del Sur of the archdiocese of Florencia – the capital city of the department of Caquetá – played a prominent role, which had not yet been researched. The Vicaría was created in the late 1980s by a Catholic priest and a nun to improve the quality of life of rural populations. It has been organising peasant

communities since the early 1990s.⁴ This selection meant that the majority of our research participants in our Colombia case study belonged to a Catholic faith community. In Brazil, we selected the case of the Belo Monte dam. This is a well-known case that has already been researched.⁵ However, the role of faith communities in the mobilisation against the dam had not yet received attention. Our research focused on the area around Altamira, the main municipality affected, and the Xingu Forever Alive Movement (Movimento Xingu Vivo Para Sempre, MXVS), which has been coordinating the mobilisation. Given the broad-based nature of the MXVS social movement and its integration of a large array of civil society actors, our research participants in our Brazil case study included both members of Catholic and evangelical faith communities.

After obtaining research ethics clearance from the two institutions leading the research (the World Resources Institute and the Laudato Si' Research Institute), fieldwork was conducted in each site in June and July 2023. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of organisations involved in the mobilisations. Research participants were approached through a snowball technique via our collaborating organisations, namely the Vicaría del Sur and the MXVS. We held 21 interviews in Caquetá,⁶ and 17 interviews in Altamira.⁷ Interviews were structured around questions related to the history of the participant's organisation/community/movement, the social and environmental impacts of the oil/dam project, and the nature of their particular mobilisation. Participants were also asked about the various actions taken and support received, about their motivation to act, and about how they understood the relationship between God, human rights and environmental protection. In both sites, several attempts were made to interview government and

4 Its work is situated within the wider historical involvement of the Catholic Church in accompanying rural workers in Colombia. The Church ran, among other initiatives, a radio station that broadcast educational programmes for rural communities and supported the creation of the Workers Union and National Agrarian Federation (CNMH 2016).

5 For academic literature on the Belo Monte dam, see, among others, Atkins (2020), Bratman (2014), Fleury and Almeida (2013), Jaichand and Sampaio (2022), Santana and Brzezinski (2018) and Taylor Klein (2022).

6 We interviewed 15 members of the Commissions for the Life of Water in six municipalities, four members of the Vicaría del Sur, one representative of the Departmental Roundtable for the Defence of Water and Territory (a local government body) and one representative of the NGO Corporación Terrae.

7 We interviewed the Catholic bishop of Xingu, three Catholic priests, one Catholic sister, one representative of the Indigenous Missionary Council, MXVS, Altamira Women's Movement, Black Movement of Altamira, and the Movement of People Affected by Dams, three representatives of organisations of riverine communities, one pastor of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and one of the Assembly of God, and two Indigenous leaders.

business representatives, but to no avail. There was a long process of securing clearance through various levels of responsibility within the government or company in different locations in the country.

In addition to interviews, two focus groups were held in Caquetá and three in Altamira.⁸ Each followed the same structure. Participants were first asked to develop a timeline of the conflict, mark different milestones, and highlight what they had learned. They then drew a map of the various actors involved, and identified the interests and positions of these actors in relation to the respective project. This exercise highlighted some major strategies taken in defence of human rights and ecosystems. Second, focus group participants received a fictitious letter, written by us, which simulated a similar situation faced by another faith community. They were asked what advice they would give to this (fictitious) community. This exercise highlighted some critical components of the mobilisation in which they themselves were involved.

All interviews and focus group discussions in Caquetá were conducted in Spanish by Maria Paula Barrera and in Altamira in Portuguese by Luiz Felipe Lacerda. Recurrent themes and keywords were noted to guide data analysis. All research participants have been anonymised and are referred to by their organisational membership.

Throughout the research process, we adopted a participatory and decolonial research methodology. The research findings presented in the next two sections have been discussed with research participants and the two local organisations which facilitated the research. Representatives of these organisations met in an online seminar convened by the research team (which the authors were part of) to respond to the findings in dialogue with each other. During that meeting, some participants expressed how valuable it was to share their struggles with others facing similar circumstances in other countries and to learn from them.⁹

8 In Caquetá, we held one focus group with eight members of the Vicaría del Sur, and one with 11 members of the Commission for the Life of Water from the municipality where the oil exploration is most extensive. In Altamira, we held one focus group with five nuns from a religious congregation which works with resettled communities displaced by the dam, one with 12 women linked to the Women's Movement and the MXVS, and one with seven people associated with the Indigenous Missionary Council and pastoral works of the Catholic diocese of Xingu.

9 The meeting took place on 3 April 2024, and included two other representative organisations. This paper is part of a wider research project on faith-based participation in natural resource governance; see Deneulin et al. (2024). We focus in this paper on the two cases from the Amazon region.

As there was no Indigenous community presence in our field site in Colombia, and as we did not interview Indigenous communities directly in Altamira (only two Indigenous leaders who participated in the MXVs activities), we did not directly adopt research methods specific to researching Indigenous communities beyond adopting a participatory and decolonial perspective. As Smith (2021, 286) writes in her seminal book on decolonising research methodologies,

decolonizing methodologies is concerned not so much with the actual technique of selecting a method but much more with the context in which research problems are conceptualized and designed, and with the implications of research for its participants and their communities.

We attempted to follow this approach by framing and conducting our research collaboratively with local organisations, and by enabling them to compare and learn from different experiences across contexts. Several participants told the research team that their participation in the research was an empowering experience and that they no longer felt alone in their struggles.

3 The El Nopal Oil Block Project in Caquetá, Colombia

Caquetá is one of the six departments of the Colombian Amazon and has the second-highest deforestation rate in Latin America (Global Forest Watch 2023). It has also been one of the areas most affected by Colombia's civil war, with guerrilla, paramilitary and narco-trafficking networks disputing territorial control (Niño et al. 2002). Paradoxically, peace initiatives led to the arrival of oil companies, which decades of violence had prevented from entering the area (Díaz 2019). Oil exploration had been incentivised by government policies which promoted foreign investment in the extractive sector and loosened environmental regulations. Under the presidency of Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) these policies became known as the “mining-energy locomotive”, with the assumption that the mining and energy sector would drive greater prosperity for all.

In 2012, two oil companies entered two municipalities in the department of Caquetá.¹⁰ The Vicaría del Sur organised a forum on oil exploration in Caquetá with local communities to discuss a shared response. The forum

¹⁰ The companies were Emerald Energy (then British owned) and Pacific Rubiales (now Frontera Energy).

led to the creation of a Commission for the Life of Water (Comisión por la Vida del Agua, CVA), which was to become the springboard for community mobilisation against oil projects in the whole area. In 2014, when the company Emerald Energy entered two other municipalities of the department to start exploration, in a project that became known as Bloque El Nogal, two other Commissions for the Life of Water were created. If completed, the El Nogal oil block would be the largest oil extraction project in the Colombian Amazon. At the time of writing, Emerald Energy has not yet gone beyond its exploration phase. The project has been suspended due to the social conflicts it has generated. In the following section, we examine the actions of the Vicaría del Sur and its CVAs since 2015 after the first seismic studies that were carried out by Emerald Energy.

3.1 *Faith and Community Building*

A major aspect of the mobilisation has been integrating faith, human rights and environmental protection, and training residents to assess the consequences of the oil project from that integrated perspective. The integration of what they call “faith and life” has been a core strategy of the Vicaría and its CVAs. The CVA members interviewed spoke of changing the tangible reality of the government’s extractive-based development policies and its “mining-energy locomotive” narrative by means of an invisible reality (i.e. relationships with God and God’s creation in rivers and forests). This broad understanding of faith, as a transformative practice to protect water, and in so doing to protect life itself, has led to the inclusion of other Christian denominations and collaboration with a wide array of organisations.¹¹

As part of this understanding of water protection as “faith in action”, the Vicaría has undertaken individual and community capacity-building activities. These have included training courses in human rights, land titling, the 2016 Peace Agreements¹² and leadership skills. Members of the Vicaría we interviewed reported that biblical narratives and the life of Jesus had helped them reflect on the impact of the oil project on human and non-human life: they viewed all life as a gift of God that humans have a responsibility to care for and protect when it is threatened with destruction.

Uniting around a common element (water, upon which all life depends) has been another strategy of mobilisation, as has strengthening community

11 The department of Caquetá is predominantly Catholic with some small Protestant groups.

12 See Peace Accord Matrix (2016) for details of the 2016 Peace Agreement that ended Colombia’s civil war.

relations through celebratory activities. Some research participants acknowledged that fragmentation and fear are major challenges, especially given the legacy of decades of armed conflict. Pilgrimages and water festivals have been important in overcoming fragmentation and in generating community cohesion. Celebrating water has become a unifying principle for collective action. This was noted by several of our research participants. As one Vicaría representative puts it,

All this walking that we have done through the pilgrimages for the life of water is a way of being motivated: of being enlightened from both a biblical perspective and from an environmental, social and political perspective. This is what has made an impact on people's consciences and led them to make commitments.

Members of the CVAs emphasised the idea that the mobilisation to protect water is an expression of faith. It is what motivates and gives them the strength to take action despite setbacks.

Another mobilisation strategy is to organise visits to sites where the detrimental impacts of extractive projects are evident, so that local residents can see what is happening where oil projects have taken place. These visits dispel false expectations perpetuated by oil companies about the social and economic benefits of their exploitation activities, such as the promise of improved road infrastructure and better public services. Even where these do take place, they come at the cost of local water sources being contaminated. Those who visit the places where oil exploration has occurred then share their experiences within their communities, which has a multiplier effect.

Training local communities to monitor water quality has been another effective mobilisation strategy. The NGO Corporación Terrae pioneered the creation of a community monitoring school within the CVAs. Water monitoring is carried out as a collective responsibility. This is both a community-building and risk-avoidance strategy. Collective leadership and rotating responsibilities avoid putting the spotlight on single individuals, an important consideration given the threats that environmental defenders face in Colombia.¹³ All CVA members who were interviewed understood these monitoring responsibilities in relation to their faith. They understood living their faith as working for the good of the community and the protection of the life of water. Some research

13 In 2024, Colombia had the highest number of land and environmental defenders killed (Global Witness 2025).

participants expressed this in terms of “being a good Christian is being a good citizen”.

3.2 *Public Action and Narrative Building*

One of the first mobilisation actions of the CVAs was to establish a roadblock. Over 62 days in 2015, CVA members took turns to chain themselves to a bridge to prevent oil company lorries from passing. The Vicaría also helped finance a technical evaluation of an environmental impact assessment carried out by Emerald Energy, which was shown to have been biased.¹⁴ Corporación Terrae led the evaluation in collaboration with the University of the Amazon in Caquetá, with the financial support of the German Catholic NGO Misereor. This collaborative dimension of the Vicaría’s work was mentioned by our research participants as being fundamental. At the seminar to discuss the preliminary research findings, a Vicaría leader emphasised that it was this broad-based coalition with civil society actors and some local government bodies that enabled them to realise their objectives of protecting the life of water in the region.¹⁵

Another action was a public audience with the National Authority of Environmental Licences in May 2018. The audience gathered more than 2,000 participants and included all the main actors linked to the conflict – government, business and civil society. Civil society participants carried banners with messages such as “No to energy mining extractivism in the Amazon”. The divergence of interests based on different development narratives was obvious. The government’s position revolved around prioritising energy and mining, promising that these investments would bring employment as well as improvements in health and education for local populations. This was also the main discourse of the companies, who stressed that opposition to their activities would be detrimental to local communities. It was during this audience that the technical evaluation of the environmental impact assessment was presented. Even if Emerald Energy was subsequently granted a licence

14 The initial Impact Assessment was based on a survey of farms in areas that had already been deforested and which had few aquifers, thus minimising the environmental impact of the project (Díaz 2018).

15 Collaborating organisations include: the Colombian environmental NGO CENSAT Agua Viva, the Colombian associations Minga and Colectivo Sugamuxi, the collective ANSUR, the Foundation Chasquis, ecumenical organisations such as the Centro Ecueménico para América Latina de Comunicación, local government-based associations such as Asociación de Juntas de Acción Comuna and the Departmental Roundtable for the Defence of Water and Territory, the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network and the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon.

for the construction of ten exploratory oil platforms, the public audience was perceived by our research participants as a moment of triumph and empowerment. It helped raise awareness of the El Nogal oil block and its impacts at the national level. This bridging of the local, national and international levels has been essential to the mobilisation strategies.

Mobilising discourses around “water is life” and “defence of the territory” have been another aspect of the work of the CVAs. They see their actions as resistance struggles against the government’s development narratives about oil exploitation bringing economic prosperity and social improvements.¹⁶ They contest the narrative that sees rivers and soils as natural resources that can be exploited for financial gain. The naming of a commission “for the life of water” instead of “for life and water” evidences a commitment to recognise that nature is integrated with human lives and is not a separate entity. As one CVA representative underlined: “We are water. The human body is 75% water.” Through this discourse, the Vicaría and its CVAs have sought to construct alternative ways of valuing nature, not as a resource to be exploited, but as life that has to be cared for and protected. As noted above, this framing of the “life of water” is rooted in a biblical understanding of the world as God’s creation and in a belief that humans have a responsibility to care for it. It is also inclusive of other social actors who can share in the narrative that water is life, as no life exists without water – even if this does not entail subscribing to an explicitly Christian framing.

In this way the CVAs contest a dominant national development narrative which legitimises the exploitation of nature under a discourse of economic prosperity and social improvement. The change or social transformation that they seek is the replacement of an extractive development model with an alternative one that cares for the life of water, and for the life of the humans and non-humans who depend on it. The Vicaría has launched an initiative, *Finca Amazónica* (Amazonian farms), to implement forms of regenerative agriculture through new sowing, production and consumption practices. The initiative includes training in agricultural techniques applied to the Amazon ecosystem, waste management, agroforestry and methods for the conservation of native seeds.

16 In a media interview, the president of the Colombian Oil and Gas Association lamented that investments of \$3 billion were planned in Caquetá, but would not be made due to opposition (Cajamarca 2023).

3.3 *Some Challenges*

According to one Vicaría member, oil companies have started to see the Church as an obstacle to their activities. This has created some tensions with those in Church leadership who hold less anti-extractive positions. Their rationale is that the Church should not be seen to be partisan, but rather must accompany everyone – oil company executives and farmers alike. However, despite these reports of tensions, the archbishop of Florencia continues to be supportive of the work of the Vicaría and its CVAs. In his preface to a Vicaría publication, he “invites the community in general to fall more in love each day with our beloved Amazon. [...] We need to know her, be willing to respect her, care for her and feel her as part of ourselves” (Caritas Colombiana 2020). Since our fieldwork took place, the Catholic Church in Latin America has taken a course of more radical mobilisation against extractive-led development. In June 2025, the Latin American bishops whose dioceses have been most affected by extractive activities stated that the Church cannot remain neutral and

is called to put itself on the side of the human and non-human victims, keeping open an institutional dialogue alongside them, in the search for justice, inclusion and protagonism of those impoverished

CELAM 2025, 13

Another challenging area is gender and female leadership. The Vicaría is now predominantly composed of, and led by, women, and has put gender equality and female leadership at the top of its priorities. Despite its female leadership, decisions are still made by men, as the Vicaría depends on the Catholic hierarchy, which is all male. This is an ongoing tension, as expressed by several of our female research participants. However, we cannot expand on it in this paper.

Not mentioned as a challenge by our research participants, but important to note, is the colonial legacy of the Catholic Church in Latin America, set within the wider history of the colonisation of the continent by the Spanish and Portuguese crowns. In Caquetá, the first colonisers entered the region together with Spanish Franciscan missionaries in the late 17th century (Niño et al. 2002) – four Indigenous groups remain today in Caquetá, but no Indigenous group was affected by the El Nogal project. With the post-World War II decolonisation process, the Catholic Church has undergone its own self-critical examination of its collusion with colonising forces, including an official repudiation of the 16th century Doctrine of Discovery (Levey 2024). Under the papacy of Pope Francis, with the Amazon Synod, the Catholic Church made Indigenous rights and environmental protection its priority, and Pope Leo XIV is continuing in this direction. In Colombia, the Catholic Church has similarly made the

protection of Indigenous rights and the environment its priorities, but within a wider context of peacebuilding in the country.¹⁷

The work of the Vicaría in the Colombian Amazon has been shaped by these wider ecclesial orientations towards making the Church adopt an “Amazonian face” (Francis 2020, 61). As a Vicaría member expressed in relation to this historical legacy:

We want to show the Church with an Amazonian face because, in its history, the Church has facilitated the extraction of gold and quinine and has destroyed the original peoples. It has interfered with the culture of the Amazon in order to extract wealth. We want to show that this was one moment of history and now is another moment.

This “Amazonian face” is expressed in the banners the CVAs display during their activities and the slogans they use in their discourses, such as “More water, more life; Caquetá is Amazon”. Such discourses are part of the Vicaría’s strategy to make local peasant communities see the water and biodiversity of the region as part of the wider Amazon biome that has to be protected and cared for. As a peasant and resident of Caquetá puts it,

We were not sure that this was Amazon territory. I was born, grew up and live in this region, but I felt a bit surprised when we were told we were Amazonians. I thought that this was too Indigenous, that being Amazonian was being someone living in the midst of the forest. Today, we are proud to be part of the Amazon, to say that we are Amazonians, because before, we didn’t see it as something good.

The main challenge that members of the Vicaría conveyed is the long-term sustainability of their work and the inclusion of younger members, as most of its participants to date have been middle-aged or elderly. This is why many of its activities focus on training young people and strengthening youth organisations through parishes. The Vicaría has been organising youth-focused training on human rights and issues affecting the Amazon region, as well as “schools of democracy and peace” for young people. This faith-based process

17 In 2024, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Colombia introduced a “Pastoral Indígena” (social apostolate for Indigenous peoples) which aims at promoting intercultural dialogue with Indigenous spiritualities, protecting Indigenous rights and supporting their collective organisations (CEC 2024).

of mobilisation to defend human rights and protect ecosystems is also happening in other places in the Amazon region, as our second case study examines.

4 The Belo Monte Hydroelectric Dam in Pará, Brazil

The Belo Monte dam in the Brazilian state of Pará is the fifth largest in the world. Situated along the Xingu, a tributary of the Amazon River, its construction started in 2011 and it became operational in 2016. Due to climate change and the recurrence of severe droughts in the region, it has however only been able to generate a fraction of its capacity so far. The dam led to an estimated 30,000 people being relocated to the outskirts of the city of Altamira in new housing developments which have inadequate access to electricity, water, sanitation, transport, health and other services. The city doubled its population in five years, which has led to overstretched housing and infrastructure, and to violence. The dam has also caused deforestation and biodiversity loss. It depleted fish stock and impacted the livelihoods of riverine communities. During our fieldwork, some research participants showed us an 800-year-old ceiba tree whose roots were drying out due to changed water flows, and riverine residents told us they were more exposed to snakes and insects because of the drop in water levels of the Xingu River.

One of the first and largest mobilisations in response to the news that a dam would be built was a Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples of the Xingu in 1989. The meeting was facilitated by the then Catholic bishop, Don Erwin Kräutler, and took place in the Catholic Church headquarters. After a confrontation between Indigenous peoples and the energy company, the dam size was reduced by two thirds. The World Bank withdrew its funding after Bishop Kräutler went to a World Bank meeting in Switzerland to speak about human rights violations (Taylor Klein 2022, 38). The building of the dam nonetheless went ahead. Today, the resistance continues and extends to other extractive and mega-infrastructure projects in the region.¹⁸ The Movimento Xingu Vivo Para Sempre (MXVS) is now the largest of these resistance movements, and coordinates the work of other organisations in a broad-based coalition. We examine its response following the same structure as the previous case study.

18 The Canadian mining company Belo Sun is seeking to start one of the largest gold extraction operations in Latin America in the region. According to Amazon Watch, if the project goes ahead, it will be “one of the most destructive mining projects the Amazon has ever faced” (Poirier 2025).

4.1 *Faith and Community Building*

As in Caquetá, community building is the central axis of the mobilisation. It also integrates faith and commitment to environmental protection and the defence of human rights. The Catholic Church played a key role in this community building through the creation of Base Ecclesial Communities from the 1960s onwards.¹⁹ Its work is focused on capacity development, strengthening community associations and rural unions, and on building links between communities and social movements. Notably, the Catholic Church established the Indigenous Missionary Council (Conselho Indigenista Missionário, CIMI) in 1972 to defend the rights of Indigenous peoples. In 1975, it created the Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra, CPT) to defend land and human rights in rural communities. The CPT was instrumental in founding the world's largest social movement, the Landless Workers Movement (MST) (Pinto 2015). Both organisations are active in the Altamira region, and it was CIMI that facilitated the 1989 Meeting of Indigenous Peoples of the Xingu. Some of our research participants highlighted the training of community leaders as an important aspect of the Church's work. As a Catholic priest explains,

The strategy has always been to organise the people to put pressure on the authorities. Don Erwin had a lot of charisma: he was a figure who brought people together, he was a symbol of that commitment and an image of a Church of Christ that denounced [injustice], and sought support throughout the world for the cause of the local people.

Chapels and churches not only serve as places of prayer and worship. They are also places where people meet to reflect on their local situation, and on how to organise and respond in the light of their faith commitments. They serve as training places for community organising and leadership skills.

Several of our research participants spoke of promoting justice and protecting ecosystems as being intrinsic to their faith. They expressed their motivation to participate in the mobilisation using the analogy of following Jesus, who was persecuted and crucified. As a MXVs leader put it,

We always work from looking at the word of God, the New Testament, and comparing it with our reality. This is what we have learned in the Base Ecclesial Communities. It is a Christian faith centred on citizenship.

19 Base Ecclesial Communities are small communities that regularly meet to read the Gospel and assess their surrounding social and economic realities in its light. This assessment is the springboard for action to promote social justice (Schickendantz 2023).

It is seeking the example of Jesus in the struggle for justice. This generates hope.

Those who have been killed for protecting ecosystems and defending human rights serve as particular symbols of love and sacrifice. They are commemorated through events. There is for example an annual “pilgrimage of the forest” to remember the life and commitments of Dorothy Stang.²⁰ As in Caquetá, some of our research participants mentioned the relationship between their Christian faith and being a good citizen, referring especially to the Beatitudes as a roadmap for promoting justice. For them, Sr Dorothy was an inspiration and living incarnation of this Christ-like way of living. The celebration of the life of “eco-martyrs” (Gandolfo-O'Donnell 2023) has also been an important strategy for community mobilisation, and for strengthening human rights and environmental commitments. As a Catholic priest commented,

The Catholic Church is a follower of Jesus and has a preferential option for the poor: the Church of Jesus must be against injustice. We, those of the Catholic faith, have always worked to commemorate our past, our martyrs, those who died in the struggle. Remembering in a formative way, not letting people forget the past, this is what feeds hope in the face of the fight.

Compared to Caquetá, there is a wider presence of Protestant faith communities in Altamira. These exhibit a diversity of responses, according to our research participants. A minority associated with historical Protestantism, such as the Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian churches, follow roughly the same approach as the Catholic Church, though with no marked institutional position from the leadership. Pentecostal churches such as The Assembly of God have regarded the dam as unavoidable and have tended to prioritise the needs of their members. According to some of our research participants, some members of Pentecostal churches joined in public demonstrations and meetings at first, but as the dam went ahead they shifted from a position of resistance to a preference to negotiate to secure benefits. Neo-Pentecostal churches, such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God,²¹ have tended to adopt a palliative approach. They work on supporting

20 Dorothy Stang was an American Catholic nun murdered in July 2005 for her work among poor rural families in the Amazon region.

21 Pentecostalism emphasises a direct and personal experience of the Holy Spirit and an individual moral discourse, neo-Pentecostalism links faith to financial and personal

people suffering from the negative consequences of the dam, such as attending to substance abuse due to worsening social conditions, and offering food to those who have lost their livelihoods. Some participants spoke of pastors sometimes discouraging people from joining social movements, though there is no uniform pattern, and some members of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches have participated in mobilisation activities.

This is why one mobilisation strategy has been to emphasise a common experience, which has been the focus of the Movement of People Affected by Dams. As a representative of the Movement explains,

We work like this, we go to the communities and gather the affected people, we listen to their demands [...]. And I tell you that the majority within our base groups are evangelicals. They have a lot of presence in communities, and in times of need, no one wants to talk about Catholics or evangelicals. Those who are in the territory want to survive.

This work of constructing unity was especially highlighted by an MXVS representative. They underline that the main strategy of defending human rights and protecting territories was to unite local communities on the basis of what they have in common, whether this is faith or the shared experience of being affected by extractive or mega-infrastructure projects.

4.2 *Public Action and Narrative Building*

As in Caquetá, an important strategy has been building alternative development narratives to the government narratives which commodify nature and threaten life in all its forms. Some of our informants expressed that the presidencies of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2011, 2023–to date) and Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), despite their progressive discourses, have continued to place the Amazon forest at the service of international commodity markets, and that the state has continued to support extractive and mega-infrastructure projects under the promises of better quality of life and employment for local communities. In a speech in 2010 in Altamira, President Lula affirmed that the project would bring “money that the state of Pará has never seen, to take care of social issues”, money “to improve the life of the riverine communities, to improve the life of Indigenous peoples, to improve the life of the farmers” (International Rivers 2010). Governments linked to the Workers’ Party have shown greater

success. The Christian Congregation and the Assembly of God are the oldest Pentecostal churches in Brazil, and the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God the largest neo-Pentecostal (Chesnut and Kingsbury 2022).

concern about the impacts of these extractive and mega-infrastructure projects on local communities, and have opened inter-ministerial lines for mitigation programmes (Taylor Klein 2022). Despite these mitigation measures, they have however continued to promote extractive-led development narratives. As a riverine community leader expresses: “They lied to us, they came promising many things and ended up taking us out of the territory, killing everything we knew, ruining our way of life – They lied!”

There is an evident conflict of narratives between on the one hand government and businesses, both of whom promote a developmental idea of “progress”, and on the other local and faith communities (though not all), who see in this same idea of “progress” a threat to their lives and the lives of ecosystems. They reject a view of nature as a set of natural resources to be used for human ends. Instead, they see nature as a living entity. An MXVS leader mentioned that the movement’s name came from writing a letter, “SOS Xingu”, as if the river was speaking to the community. According to them, it is precisely because “people couldn’t communicate any more with the river” due to the dam and its consequences – fish dying, loss of livelihoods, skin diseases, agriculture affected due to changes in water flows, river water no longer drinkable, etc. – that the mobilisation emerged. They summarised their motivation for their socio-environmental action as follows:

The connection with life is the source of hope to reconstruct what has been destroyed. Without that connection, that strength coming from the connection with forests, rivers and ancestors, there would be no motivation for the struggle. [...] If we lose nature, we lose ourselves too. Our struggles are survival struggles. Rivers and forests are everything; without them, there is no life.

As in Caquetá, local communities have built alliances in order to amplify their strategies to defend life, human and non-human alike. These alliances help them achieve greater visibility, and enable them to build a stronger and more influential presence in national and international communications and debates. The Catholic Church remains an important ally today, as it has been historically, though less via missionaries as in the past and more via national and regional networks, such as the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (Red Eclesial Pan-Amazónica, REPAM).²² CIMI and the CPT remain major actors in

22 Founded in 2014, REPAM is a network of Catholic organisations across the nine countries of the Amazon biome. Its aim is to coordinate actions to protect ecosystems in the Amazon region and the life of its peoples.

the region. Their work includes facilitating the participation of local peoples in meetings of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the United Nations Human Rights Commission, as well as strategic engagement with the legislative and executive branches of the federal government, especially on land rights. Today, the Catholic Church is no longer the sole supporting and mediating organisation. Many environmental and human rights organisations have joined in supporting local communities over the last two decades.

4.3 *Some Challenges*

Despite its pioneering role in generating community mobilisation, our research participants mentioned a change in the Catholic Church's leadership, with its human rights and justice work being delegated to CIMI and CPT. They no longer see the direct involvement of bishops and priests themselves, as at the time of Dons Erwin Kräutler and Tomás Balduino, who founded CIMI and CPT. An explanatory factor that our participants mentioned was social media, and the risks posed to those who speak out to denounce injustices in a politically polarised national context. The trend may however be reversing, with Catholic leadership taking public positions regarding certain development narratives. In June 2025, in advance of the COP30 in Belém, the Latin American Church, together with the Asian and African Catholic Churches, issued a statement in which they called for peace “through an ecological conversion that transforms the current model of development based on extractivism, technocracy and the commodification of nature” (CELAM, SECAM and FABC 2025, 8). The National Bishops' Conference of Brazil (CNBB) has also created a special commission on integral ecology and mining. In July 2025, it published a manifesto which condemns extractive-led development. It argues “that if we do not urgently change the course of what we call development, *the sky will fall on our heads*”²³ (CNBB 2025, 9), a position which reflects the evolution of the Catholic social tradition since the publication of *Laudato Si'* and the *Amazon Synod* (Francis 2015, 2020).²⁴ With these positions of the global and national

23 This is a reference to Davi Kopenawa's book *The Falling Sky* (Kopenawa et al. 2013). The book narrates the vision of life of the Yanomamis. It argues that the white people risk bringing the entire world to collapse (“the falling sky”) with their vision of development as unlimited material consumption and exploitation of nature.

24 In October 2019, Pope Francis convened a month-long gathering in Rome to discuss the problems faced by the Amazon biome and its peoples; participants included numerous representatives of Indigenous organisations. How the growing dialogue between Catholic theology with Indigenous cosmologies is shaping the evolution of the social teachings of the Catholic Church is beyond the scope of the paper.

episcopal leadership, one can expect these tensions between the grassroots and the leadership to ease.

As in Caquetá, women's grassroots leadership has been a foundation stone of the mobilisation. Our research participants summarised it as, "The face of the resistance in the Xingu is feminine." As a Catholic priest interviewed expressed it, "Women took a lot of leadership in these demonstrations, they began to gain a volume that reached within schools, families, homes; they were the seed." He noted that women added a specific dimension to the mobilisation, as they looked at issues in a transversal way, going beyond land rights to include women's rights and children's rights, and access to education and health. However, women have no official leadership in the Catholic Church. Recognising their leadership through diaconal ordination has been demanded by the Catholic bishops of the Amazon, but no decision has yet been made on the matter by the Vatican.

In relation to colonial history, the Brazilian Catholic Church is unique in Latin America in having set up in the 1970s an Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI) as part of its National Bishops' Conference. CIMI has played a critical role in defending the rights of Indigenous peoples (Gomes de Andrade Pereira 2021). It is today the main platform in the country where the violation of Indigenous rights is documented, and a source of information for global data on environmental defenders (CIMI 2024; Global Witness 2024, 2025). Its activities include community organising, technical advice and intermediation with other political and social actors.²⁵

As was true for the Vicaría in Caquetá, the work of the MXVS faces challenges of sustainability. Likewise, it makes nurturing youth leadership one of its priorities. As a representative of the Movement of People Affected by Dams in Altamira shared,

In recent years we have focused on training youth, now in this next work plan we will focus on training leaders. We use popular education, Paulo Freire's pedagogy. We have other methodologies than just reading

25 The principles structuring the work of CIMI (n.d.) are: "Respect for Indigenous otherness in their ethnic-cultural and historical plurality and appreciation of the traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples; protagonism of Indigenous peoples; the choice of and commitment to the Indigenous cause within a broader perspective of a democratic, just, supportive, multiethnic and multicultural society." These principles are based on the post-Second Vatican Council theological commitments to intercultural dialogue and human rights. For a discussion of the historical and theological foundations of CIMI, see Campos (2010), CIMI (2015) and Suess (2003).

material; we work with art, theatre, other expressions, even the Theatre of the Oppressed. We have to pass the dialogue through the body too.

Other youth-focused activities include the “pilgrimage of the forest” in memory of Dorothy Stang, so as to inspire social and environmental justice commitments among youth. Working with young people in urban areas remains, however, more challenging. For example, our research participants were worried about organised crime, which was for many young people a way of making a living in the absence of other opportunities. They saw it as essential to start initiatives that would provide employment opportunities for young people.

5 Conclusions

Taking up the invitation by Tomalin (2021, 106) “to move beyond prioritizing the agenda of secular global development institutions”, and to “reconstruct” the religion and development field by analysing local faith communities and their vision of social transformation and objectives, this paper has examined the role of faith communities in two cases of socio-environmental conflicts in the Amazon region. Interviews and focus groups have revealed that they did not understand their actions in terms of either “religion” or “development”.

On the one hand, they rejected discourses of development which their governments promoted through extractive and mega-infrastructure projects as a way of improving people’s lives. They rejected promises that these would increase social and economic opportunities for local communities. Rather, they saw in these projects a destruction of the very conditions of human and non-human life, in the region and beyond. Once the Amazon biome is destroyed to such an extent that it stops functioning as a carbon sink, the entire global population and planetary ecosystem will be affected.

On the other hand, neither did they conceive of their actions in terms of religion. For our research participants, faith was understood as identical with the defence of human rights and the protection of ecosystems. It was this connection with rivers and forests as inseparable from a connection to faith that was the motivation for their mobilisation and the reason they persevered. At times, they did use biblical language to interpret the reality they saw as contravening God’s creation and threatening the reproduction of life itself. At other times, they used a more common or universal vocabulary to convey that all are equally alive because of the “life of water” and all are equally affected by the threats posed by dams and other infrastructure. This building of a shared experience of suffering and moving from victimhood to being agents of change has

been a key area of the work of the movements analysed. Going from house to house, and from community to community, to explain the situation and stress the importance of preserving water and forests is an intervention that has been central in the two case studies. In each case, this work has been mainly led by women.

The religion and development field emerged at the time of the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) and flourished under the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030). Our research findings suggest that there may be a need to ask whether the field has now reached fulfilment, and whether it is time to move beyond it, or at least to orient it in a new direction. The field of “religion and ecology”²⁶ is an obvious contender. However, our findings point towards a more holistic perspective and one that does not isolate ecological from social concerns. Our research participants did not understand their actions as ecological action but as action to defend life, human and non-human. Our two cases have shown that local faith communities integrate faith with the defence of human rights and the protection of ecosystems, and that they are involved in all aspects of the struggle for social and environmental justice.²⁷ They are involved in struggles of distribution (protecting people’s livelihoods and health), recognition (recognising the rights of rural and Indigenous communities) and representation (being represented in policy decision-making processes). They also link local, national and global dynamics of change – all our research participants underlined how bringing their concerns to the national and international levels was critical to achieve their visions of social transformation. They nurture human–nature relationships based on mutual interdependence and care rather than separation and exploitation. And they address power imbalances between the financial interests of government/business and the lives of local communities.

With the ever-tightening ecological situation of the planet,²⁸ we argue that rerouting part of the religion and development field towards a social and environmental justice agenda that is inclusive of a faith dimension is urgently required. This also moves beyond researching the ecological commitments of faith communities. The experiences of local faith communities affected by extractive and mega-infrastructure projects driven by certain development

26 For a review of the “religion and ecology” literature, see Öhlmann and Swart (2022) and Renger et al. (2023).

27 For a summary of the literature on environmental justice, see Schlosberg et al. (2024).

28 In September 2025, the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research reported that seven of the nine critical Earth system boundaries had been breached (PIK 2025).

narratives analysed in this paper have highlighted that what is at stake is the transformation of a particular vision of progress and “development”. It is not about protecting “the environment” as if it were separate from the rest of life. Their actions are about defending human and non-human life, about changing development narratives, and about enacting new human–non-human species relationships that are based on care and reciprocity rather than mastery and exploitation. Our research has focused on Latin America and the Amazon region. We hope that it has opened a door to analyse how local faith communities are mobilising in other critically endangered biomes which are equally threatened by narratives that socioeconomic development is best brought about by natural resource exploitation.

Acknowledgements

We thank Carrick Reddin for project managing, Carlos Zepeda for communications across linguistic divides, the World Resources Institute Brazil office, the Vicaría del Sur, the Movimento Xingu Vivo Para Sempre and the Catholic diocese of Xingu for facilitating the research. We are grateful to Harriet David and Tim Howles for careful editing. The research was funded by the Ford Foundation under the grant “Faith-Based Participation in Natural Resource Governance”, which ran from November 2022 to August 2024.

Research Ethics

Research ethics approval for the fieldwork was granted in May 2023 by the Research on Human Subjects Department of the World Resources Institute, and the Research Ethics Committee of the Oxford Department of International Development.

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Rethinking Religion in Development: Faith, Power, and the Politics of the Sustainable Development Goals

Research Article

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Received 25 August 2025 | Accepted 30 December 2025 |
Published online 17 March 2026

Abstract

Religious communities have long been underestimated as actors in global development, yet they are increasingly central to advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite the growing visibility of faith-based organizations in addressing poverty, inequality, and environmental crises, scholarship and policy often overlook the structural and cultural conditions that shape their contributions. Guided by a critical-development theoretical framework, this study foregrounds religion as a dynamic site of social transformation and examines the diverse ways religious traditions and networks mobilize values, resources, and collective action toward sustainable futures. Drawing on case studies across multiple contexts, we analyze how religious actors engage in poverty alleviation, environmental stewardship, education, and healthcare, while also negotiating tensions between spiritual commitments and development paradigms. Rather than treating religion instrumentally, we highlight

how religious communities co-construct development priorities in ways that both align with and challenge dominant models. We argue that religious communities are not merely supplementary to the SDGs but constitute critical partners whose moral and institutional infrastructures expand possibilities for more just and contextually grounded forms of global progress.

Keywords

religion – development – faith – power – politics – Sustainable Development Goals

1 Introduction

Religion has historically been cast as a private, cultural, or spiritual matter, often divorced from discourses of progress and development (Gauthier 2019; Rakodi 2015; Pecora 2006; Dirlik 2003). As global challenges – from persistent poverty to the climate crisis – intensify, the role of religious communities and faith-based organizations in shaping collective responses has become increasingly visible. However, despite their vast social reach, institutional infrastructures, and cultural influence, religion and religious actors remain on the margins of the mainstream sustainable development discourse. International development frameworks, including the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), rarely foreground religion as a legitimate basis of social action, relegating faith-based contributions to supplementary or “non-formal” roles (Leicht and Heiss 2018; Shulla et al. 2020; Kioupi and Voulvoulis 2019). This disconnect has obscured both the structural significance and the transformative potential of religious engagement in sustainable development.

Scholars of religion and development have underscored for at least two decades that secular, neoliberal models dominate global development frameworks, often sidelining or instrumentalizing religion in ways that limit its full potential (Dalton 2013; Tomalin 2018; Gokce 2020). Foundational critiques, including Jones and Petersen's (2011) “Instrumental, Narrow, Normative?” and Deneulin and Bano's (2009) *Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script*, have further highlighted how development actors approach religion with preconceived assumptions that constrain its conceptual and practical roles. This tendency has created a fragmented discourse wherein the social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of development are insufficiently integrated with political and economic paradigms. High-level conversations about sustainability, governance, and economic growth frequently overlook the lived realities of

communities for whom religion is not ancillary but constitutive of social life. As Samuels and Bernstein (2022) observe, this disjuncture produces a “glaring disconnect” between formal development policy and the grassroots work of faith-based actors who are already addressing poverty, health disparities, gender inequality, and ecological degradation in contexts of scarcity and crisis.

At the same time, the pressures of global crises – climate change, pandemics, rising inequality, and conflict – have underscored the importance of mobilizing all possible partners for sustainable development. The SDGs, adopted in 2015 as a blueprint for achieving equitable global progress by 2030, explicitly call for multi-stakeholder collaboration. Thus far, the potential contributions of religious actors remain under-theorized and under-acknowledged. Faith-based organizations are among the largest service providers in the Global South, supporting education and welfare systems through wide-ranging institutional infrastructures (Jahani and Parayandeh 2024; G. Clarke 2007; Kagawa et al. 2012). Beyond service delivery, they shape social norms and ethical frameworks and can catalyze political engagement in ways that secular institutions often struggle to emulate. Drawing on moral authority and dense communal ties that frequently extend across national boundaries, religious communities are well positioned to promote holistic approaches to sustainability that integrate material needs with broader social and spiritual concerns.

And yet, despite this growing visibility, there has been surprisingly limited scholarship on the complex interplay between religion and the SDGs (Schliesser 2024; Tomalin 2021). Scholars point to two persistent gaps: First, the tendency to view religion as either an obstacle to development – associated with conservatism, dogmatism, or resistance to change – or as an instrument to be co-opted into secular frameworks, stripped of its critical, theological, and cultural dimensions (M. Clarke 2013; Marshall 2021b; Öhlmann and Swart 2022). Second, there is insufficient examination of how religious actors themselves navigate tensions between spiritual commitments and global development agendas that are embedded in neoliberal, market-driven logics. Tomalin (2021, 108), for example, calls for deeper inquiry into how “faith-based values and practices intersect with, resist, or reshape the normative frameworks of international development.” Similarly, Haynes (2024) argues that while faith-based organizations have been recognized as service providers, their roles as critics, reformers, and innovators in development discourse remain under-theorized.

Emerging initiatives, however, suggest a growing recognition of this gap. Networks such as the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), comprising governments, multilateral agencies, and faith-based organizations, are working to build evidence of religious contributions to the SDGs and to foster constructive dialogue across secular–religious

divides (Singh 2025; Schliesser 2023). Such collaborations reflect what Wilkinson et al. (2024) term the “religion–development nexus,” a conceptual framework that foregrounds religion as both a driver of and a critical lens on sustainable development. These perspectives emphasize not only the practical contributions of religious actors but also the epistemological challenge they pose to secular development paradigms – namely, the insistence that spiritual and moral dimensions of human flourishing are integral to sustainability.

To address these theoretical gaps, this study adopts a critical-development theoretical framework grounded in scholarship that challenges instrumental, secular, and linear models of development. Drawing on critical interventions in religion and development studies (Haar 2011; Wensveen 2011; Fountain 2013; Jones and Petersen 2011; Deneulin and Bano 2009), this framework understands religion not as an exogenous variable to be mobilized for predetermined development outcomes, but as a constitutive dimension of social life that shapes values, moral reasoning, institutional practices, and collective imaginaries. In line with Jones and Petersen’s critique of “instrumental, narrow, normative” approaches, and Fountain’s analysis of the myth of religious NGOs, this study resists reductive portrayals of religion as either an obstacle to or a handmaiden of development. Instead, it conceptualizes religious actors as embedded within complex power relations and epistemic struggles that both enable and constrain development practice. By situating religion within broader critical-development debates, this framework aligns with Wensveen’s (2011) typological analysis and Haar’s (2011) call to take religious worldviews seriously as sources of social transformation rather than residual cultural factors.

Building on this critical orientation, the study further engages post-development and pluriversal scholarship that questions universalist assumptions about progress and sustainability (Kothari et al. 2019; Demaria and Kothari 2020; Demaria et al. 2023). From this perspective, “progress” is not a singular, technocratic endpoint but a contested, contextually grounded concept shaped by diverse cultural, ethical, and spiritual traditions. The notion of the pluriverse, which emphasizes the coexistence of multiple pathways to well-being and sustainability, provides an important lens for understanding how religious communities articulate alternative visions of development that may diverge from dominant SDG logics. This study therefore foregrounds religion as a dynamic force in shaping alternative imaginaries of sustainability, highlighting how faith-based actors contribute normative frameworks that challenge mainstream development paradigms. Through comparative case studies across diverse religious traditions, the analysis illuminates both the opportunities and tensions inherent in faith-based engagement with the SDGs,

moving beyond binary framings of religion as either partner or problem and instead examining its complex role in co-constructing more just and plural visions of development.

To these ends, this study situates religious engagement with the SDGs as both a site of deep ambivalence and a field of possibility: ambivalence, in that religious traditions may reinforce inequities or conflict with rights-based approaches; and possibility, in that they provide reservoirs of moral imagination, solidarity, and institutional capacity that can galvanize transformative social change. By critically examining these dynamics, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to rethink the architecture of global development through perspectives that are often marginalized in mainstream discourse.

2 Methodological Approach

This study advances a critical rethinking of how religion is conceptualized in contemporary sustainable development debates, explicitly questioning the tendency to frame religion primarily in terms of its “contributions” to pre-established, secular development agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Rather than positioning religion as a functional input into the SDG framework, the study engages two interrelated themes in the literature: (1) critical analyses of how dominant development paradigms marginalize, depoliticize, or instrumentalize religion within secular and neo-liberal logics; and (2) scholarship demonstrating how religious traditions and institutions simultaneously negotiate, contest, and at times strategically engage these paradigms, while also articulating alternative moral, social, and ecological visions of development. In this sense, the study does not treat religion as an auxiliary partner to sustainable development but as a site of critique, ethical reasoning, and meaning-making that can unsettle dominant assumptions about what development and “progress” entail. Rather than presenting original empirical data, the study synthesizes insights from a broad range of existing case studies and research to examine how religion operates as a moral framework, a source of collective action, and a potential generator of alternatives to hegemonic development logics.

The analysis is anchored in a critical-development theoretical framework that conceptualizes religion as a constitutive dimension of social life, embedded in historical, political, and cultural relations of power, rather than as an external variable to be mobilized instrumentally within development agendas. This framework enables sustained attention to how religious actors articulate normative claims about social justice, sustainability, and the good life, and how

these claims both intersect with and challenge dominant development paradigms. By foregrounding religion's epistemic and ethical dimensions, the study moves beyond binary framings of religion as either obstacle or partner and instead examines its ambivalent, contested, and context-dependent roles in shaping development imaginaries. This theoretical orientation avoids repetition by clearly situating the study within critical and post-development debates, rather than reiterating descriptive claims about religion and development.

In line with best practices in reflexive and interpretive scholarship, the study also clarifies the authors' positionality. While the analysis does not draw on original fieldwork, interviews, or autoethnographic data, the authors' long-standing engagement with the religion–development field as researchers has informed the analytical lenses employed in this study. Importantly, references to Tomalin (2021), Haynes (2024), and Marshall (2021a, 2021b) refer to their respective scholarly contributions rather than to the authors' own empirical research. These works are cited as influential interventions in the broader literature that have shaped contemporary debates on religion, development, and global policy. Their inclusion serves to situate this study within an established academic conversation, rather than to suggest personal collaboration or direct involvement in applied interventions.

All examples discussed in the study, including those concerning religious orders, faith-based service providers, and community initiatives, are drawn exclusively from peer-reviewed scholarship and publicly available documentation. No primary data collection was undertaken. The study is therefore best understood as a conceptual, interpretive contribution that critically reassesses how religion is framed within sustainable development discourse, while opening analytical space for plural, contextually grounded, and ethically informed visions of global futures.

3 Historical Continuities of Secular Development and the Marginalization of Religion

Critical scholarship on religion and development increasingly emphasizes that the marginalization of religion within the global development discourse is not incidental, but deeply rooted in the historical trajectories of secular modernity, colonial governance, and the neoliberal global order (Cornelio et al. 2021; Dalton 2013; Rakodi 2015; Tomalin 2018; Jones and Petersen 2011). Rather than treating the sidelining of religion as a contemporary oversight, this section foregrounds the structural and symbolic continuities that have long rendered religious actors peripheral or instrumentalized in the field of international development. Just as colonial administrations sought to regulate religious

institutions to buttress imperial power while undermining their autonomy, contemporary development frameworks often recognize religion only insofar as it can be functionally mobilized for service delivery, legitimizing interventions, or encouraging compliance with development agendas.

From the Enlightenment origins of secular development thought to the neoliberal restructuring of the late twentieth century, religion has been framed as either a barrier to modernization or a tool for social engineering. Early modernization theories of the 1950s and 1960s cast religion as antithetical to “progress,” associating it with tradition and a resistance to scientific rationality (Nicholls 1987; Turner 2014; Safi 2022). These frameworks presumed a linear trajectory in which societies would shed religious authority as they advanced toward industrialization and liberal democracy. Such perspectives not only sidelined religious contributions but also entrenched a developmental imagination in which secular rationality was equated with universality, with religion relegated to the private sphere.

Colonialism further entrenched these dynamics. Missionary activity, while providing education and healthcare, was frequently instrumentalized within imperial projects of social control and cultural transformation (Ullah 2025; Gladwin 2017; Porter 1997). The colonial state simultaneously relied on and restricted religious institutions, fostering a dual legacy in which religion was both essential to governance and excluded from genuine participation in shaping political and economic futures. Postcolonial states, inheriting these structures, often adopted secularist ideologies that reinforced the marginalization of religion in governance and development planning (Agensky 2020; Rakodi 2015).

The neoliberal turn of the 1980s and 1990s introduced a new phase of instrumentalization (Keil 2009). As structural adjustment programs hollowed out state welfare provision, international development agencies increasingly turned to non-state actors, including religious organizations, to fill gaps in health, education, and poverty alleviation (Nelson 2021). This engagement often reduced religion to a functional role: an efficient service provider operating within donor-driven agendas. Faith-based organizations were expected to align their practices with the metrics, language, and logics of neoliberal development, sidelining their theological, ethical, and cultural distinctiveness (Hackworth 2012; Banerjee et al. 2025). This pattern of instrumentalization persists today, with religious actors frequently engaged as implementers of SDG-related programs while their broader critiques of inequality, exploitation, or moral visions of the good life are muted or dismissed (van Winden 2024).

Thus, contemporary patterns of sidelining and instrumentalizing religion within development frameworks must be understood as part of a longer historical continuum: the secular-modernist exclusion of religion, the

colonial regulation of religious institutions, and the neoliberal co-optation of faith-based actors. Together, these dynamics produce a development discourse that is not neutral but structured by power – privileging secular, technocratic knowledge while marginalizing alternative epistemologies rooted in religious traditions.

4 Religion as Sidelined and Instrumentalized in Secular, Neoliberal Paradigms

The marginalization of religion within development discourse manifests in a dual process: its sidelining as “irrational” or “non-modern,” and its instrumentalization as a service provider (Grayson 2018). These processes are not merely abstract but are evident in concrete cases across diverse regions of the world, where faith-based actors are simultaneously indispensable to development practice yet structurally constrained by secular, neoliberal frameworks (Tomalin 2020).

Christian health networks in Africa provide a striking example of this dynamic. Across sub-Saharan Africa, faith-based organizations operate an estimated 30–50 percent of healthcare facilities (Walker 2022; Rheeder 2017; Olivier and Wodon 2014; Pallant 2012). In countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, and Tanzania, Christian hospitals and clinics form the backbone of healthcare provision, particularly in rural areas where state capacity is limited (Azevedo 2017). Despite their scale and effectiveness, these networks are rarely treated as equal partners in health policy design. International donors and national governments often regard them as convenient implementers of externally defined programs – whether HIV/AIDS interventions or maternal health initiatives – while sidelining their theological perspectives on care, dignity, and healing (Smith 2018). In some cases, restrictive donor funding has forced Christian networks to downplay or exclude explicit religious elements of their work in order to access resources, effectively instrumentalizing their infrastructure while muting their moral agency (Koehrsen and Burchardt 2024).

A parallel can be observed in Islamic charitable organizations in South Asia. Rooted in long-standing traditions of *zakat* (almsgiving), *waqf* (endowment), and *sadaqah* (voluntary charity), these institutions mobilize vast resources for poverty alleviation, education, and disaster relief (Minor 2014; Ariff 1991; Barzegar and El Karhili 2017; Haugbolle and LeVine 2022). In Pakistan, for instance, networks such as the Edhi Foundation and Al-Khidmat Foundation provide extensive welfare services, often surpassing state capacity in reach

and trust. Nevertheless, in the post-9/11 era, international counterterrorism frameworks have subjected Islamic charities to heightened surveillance, regulatory restrictions, and scrutiny. While secular NGOs are often celebrated as embodiments of civil society, Islamic charities are disproportionately framed as potential threats, their developmental role overshadowed by suspicion. This securitization reveals the asymmetrical logics of neoliberal development, which embrace religion when it is functional but marginalize or stigmatize it when it embodies alternative forms of authority or redistribution that challenge global political-economic norms.

A different but related dynamic emerges in the case of Buddhist environmental movements in Southeast Asia. In Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar, Buddhist teachings on interdependence and compassion resist deforestation, promote ecological stewardship, and protect community land rights (Zhang 2018; King 2023; Setwong 2025). Through rituals such as “tree ordinations,” monks symbolically confer sacred status on forests to deter logging and land grabs. These practices challenge dominant neoliberal paradigms of development that prioritize resource extraction, infrastructure megaprojects, and market integration. In official climate and environmental governance frameworks, such religious interventions are often dismissed as “cultural” or symbolic, rather than recognized as substantive contributions to sustainability. International policy debates on climate change continue to privilege technocratic solutions such as carbon trading and green finance, while sidelining moral-ethical approaches rooted in religious worldviews.

These case studies illustrate how the sidelining and instrumentalization of religion operate not only discursively but also institutionally. In each instance, religious actors provide indispensable services, mobilize moral frameworks, and sustain alternative visions of justice and sustainability. Importantly, their engagement is shaped by asymmetrical power relations: They are engaged when aligning with donor agendas or filling gaps left by the retreating state, but constrained, depoliticized, or stigmatized when articulating critiques of structural injustice or embodying epistemologies that resist neoliberal orthodoxy.

Conceptually, these examples underscore three key points. First, sidelining. Dominant development paradigms have long constructed religion as an obstacle to so-called “progress.” Within modernization theory, religion was equated with backwardness, irrationality, and parochialism. Even as development discourse has shifted toward more inclusive language – emphasizing participation, cultural sensitivity, and local ownership – the underlying assumption persists that “serious” development knowledge is secular, empirical, and technocratic. Religion is relegated to the domain of culture, spirituality, or private belief, and thus deemed irrelevant to structural problems such as poverty or

the climate crisis (Liu 2025; Rahman 2025; M. Clarke 2011, 2013). This sidelining is evident in the SDGs themselves, which make little explicit reference to religion despite its profound influence on billions of people worldwide.

Second, instrumentalization. When religion is acknowledged within development discourse, it is often framed in narrowly functional terms. Faith-based organizations are valued for their logistical capacities, local legitimacy, and ability to mobilize communities – attributes that align neatly with donor agendas. In this framing, religion is stripped of its theological, ethical, and political dimensions. Religious actors are expected to deliver services, disseminate health information, or encourage compliance with development programs, while their broader critiques – whether of neoliberal exploitation, structural injustice, or ecological destruction – are marginalized (Marshall 2021a).

These patterns reveal the secular biases embedded in development frameworks. The epistemological privileging of Western, technocratic knowledge delegitimizes religious epistemologies, treating them as supplementary at best or obstructive at worst. Meanwhile, the neoliberal restructuring of global development channels religious agency into depoliticized roles that serve donor priorities rather than community needs. The result is a profound mismatch between the lived centrality of religion in many communities and its marginal status in development discourse.

Examples from practice illustrate these dynamics vividly. In addition, in climate action, religious communities have mobilized moral frameworks around stewardship, justice, and interdependence. However, these frameworks are rarely recognized in climate policy debates, which privilege technocratic solutions such as carbon markets or green finance (Bracking 2015).

This dual process of sidelining and instrumentalization also generates tensions within religious communities (Clarke and Jennings 2007). Some faith-based organizations adapt their practices to align with donor priorities, while others resist, insisting on the integrity of their religious visions even at the risk of marginalization (Bornstein 2004, 2001). These negotiations reveal the complexity of religious engagement with development: Far from being passive recipients of secular frameworks, religious actors actively contest, reinterpret, and reshape the terms of their participation (Ridde and de Sardan 2022).

In this context, religion should not be understood merely as a “missing partner” in development, but as a site of struggle over knowledge, authority, and legitimacy. Conceptualizing religion solely as an implementer of secular goals risks overlooking its potential as a critical interlocutor capable of questioning the assumptions of neoliberal development (Tomalin et al. 2019). Faith-based actors often bring normative commitments that critique the commodification of land, labor, and nature – commitments that could meaningfully enrich the SDG agenda if taken seriously.

The study argues that to comprehend the full significance of religion in sustainable development, one must trace the genealogies of secular exclusion and neoliberal instrumentalization that continue to shape its position today. Religion is not absent from development – it is actively marginalized, disciplined, and co-opted. Recognizing this reality shifts the analytical lens from seeing religion as an obstacle or a tool to appreciating it as a dynamic field of agency, critique, and alternative vision.

5 Religious Traditions as Sites of Collaboration and Contestation

Religion is not just doctrine; it is practice, community, and moral imagination. It encompasses both prayer and protest, ritual and resource, shaping social and ethical life (Asad 2003).

In the sprawling neighborhoods of Nairobi's Eastlands, we encountered a group of young women gathered at a small Catholic parish church that had opened its hall to host free evening classes in literacy, basic computer skills, and reproductive health. During an informal conversation, one of the nuns involved in coordinating the program explained that the initiative sought not only to provide technical skills but also to affirm participants' sense of dignity and self-worth. The program was supported by a transnational Catholic network but organized and implemented locally, reflecting a hybrid model commonly discussed in the literature on faith-based development.

At the time of this encounter, public messaging in nearby areas prominently advertised government-led initiatives on "digital transformation" and "youth empowerment." However, several participants noted that such initiatives had not translated into accessible opportunities in their everyday lives. In this context, the parish hall functioned as a visible and concrete site of social support and learning. The vignette is not intended to serve as standalone empirical evidence, but rather as a contextual illustration that complements the study's literature-based analysis by grounding abstract debates in an observed development setting. It draws on the authors' direct observational experience during a professional engagement with a faith-based community initiative in Nairobi's Eastlands and is included for illustrative purposes. It reflects a broader paradox: Religious communities are often the most proximate providers of services and sources of solidarity, yet they remain structurally ambivalent within global development frameworks. They are engaged when filling service gaps left by state retreat but constrained when articulating critiques of neoliberal modernity. Across the world, religious institutions both collaborate with and contest dominant paradigms, mobilizing their values, traditions, and networks to address issues such as poverty, health, education, migration,

and climate change. These engagements are not neutral; they reveal the deep entanglements of power, faith, and development.

Religious traditions, like land in African contexts, are more than functional resources; they are symbolic terrains where meanings of justice, dignity, and development are negotiated (Wangila 2010; Agbiji and Swart 2015). They embody both compliance and resistance, serving as partners in delivering global agendas like the SDGs, while also cultivating moral critiques that challenge market-driven, technocratic development. To understand their role, it is necessary to attend both to their material contributions – schools, hospitals, aid programs – and to the symbolic and political meanings they generate through ritual, discourse, and collective imagination.

This section argues that religious traditions and institutions act as arenas of both collaboration and contestation. They mobilize resources and networks that extend beyond state or market logics, but they also carry normative visions that can either reinforce or subvert neoliberal frameworks. Their engagement constitutes a dual dynamic: On one hand, they are indispensable partners in the machinery of development; on the other, they are agents of critique, resistance, and alternative world-making.

6 Mobilizing Religion: between Complicity and Critique

The dual character of religious engagement is particularly visible in the health-care sector in sub-Saharan Africa. In Uganda, Kenya, and Nigeria, Christian health networks operate extensive systems of hospitals, clinics, and training centers, often filling critical gaps in state provision (Chepng'eno 2023; Lloyd et al. 2019; Ringera et al. 2024). Demonstrating collaboration, faith-based hospitals are integrated into national health systems and co-funded by governments and international donors. They are instrumental in achieving targets for maternal health, vaccination, and HIV/AIDS treatment. However, these collaborations often come with conditions – donors may restrict funding for reproductive health services or require the depoliticization of faith narratives. Christian networks thus negotiate between delivering life-saving care and maintaining theological commitments, resisting reduction to mere contractors of secular agendas.

A similar dynamic is evident in Islamic charitable traditions in South Asia. *Zakat* and *waqf* institutions mobilize resources annually for schools, hospitals, orphanages, and poverty relief (Bukhari 2025; Razak 2020; Ayub et al. 2024). In Pakistan, the Edhi Foundation has become one of the largest welfare providers in the country (Iqbal et al. 2021). Here religion collaborates with the state

to supplement a weak welfare infrastructure while simultaneously contesting neoliberal paradigms through its ethic of redistribution, rooted in Islamic obligation rather than market efficiency. The post-9/11 securitization of Islamic charities illustrates how global governance selectively embraces or excludes religious institutions depending on geopolitical priorities.

Religious mobilization also extends to environmental struggles (Punmanee 2022; Sangpikul 2008; Kontogeorgopoulos and Chulikavit 2010). By symbolically integrating forests into the moral universe of Buddhist cosmology, they disrupt neoliberal logics of commodification. Eco-Buddhism demonstrates how ritual itself becomes a form of contestation while also collaborating with international conservation NGOs, highlighting the oscillation between complicity and critique.

Latin America provides a historical example of explicit contestation: liberation theology in the 1970s and 1980s. Catholic priests, nuns, and lay activists in mobilized biblical narratives of justice to support peasant movements against authoritarian regimes (Baisotti 2022; Peterson 1996; Nepstad 2014). Their theology framed poverty as the result of structural sins such as inequality and imperialism, directly contesting neoliberal development paradigms. Although institutional churches later moderated their positions, the legacy of liberation theology continues to inspire community-based struggles for land, housing, and ecological justice.

These cases illustrate how religious mobilization straddles the line between complicity and critique. Three themes emerge:

- Material collaboration: Providing indispensable resources like schools, clinics, and aid networks, making religious actors attractive partners for states and donors.
- Symbolic resistance: Through ritual, theology, and moral discourse, articulating alternative visions of justice and sustainability that challenge neoliberal orthodoxy.
- Ambivalent positioning: Negotiating between grassroots communities and transnational networks, constantly balancing alignment with powerful actors and solidarity with marginalized populations.

This dual role is intrinsic to religion's embeddedness in everyday life. Faith-based actors inhabit "contradictory locations" (Coronil 2000), sites where global power is both reproduced and contested.

The implications are significant. Treating religion solely as a partner in delivering the SDGs risks overlooking its capacity for critique and transformation. Conversely, romanticizing it as inherently resistant ignores its complicity in reproducing social hierarchies or conservative moralities. The challenge is to approach religion as a dynamic field of struggle, where collaboration and

contestation coexist, and where values, resources, and networks are mobilized in ways that both sustain and subvert dominant paradigms.

7 Conclusion: toward Transformative Religious Futures in Sustainable Development

Recent scholarship on religion and sustainable development has increasingly emphasized the ambivalent, contested, and context-dependent roles of religious actors within global governance frameworks (Deneulin and Bano 2009; Jones and Petersen 2011; Fountain 2013; Tomalin 2021). Building on these critical perspectives, this study has shown that religious traditions and institutions function simultaneously as moral authorities, service providers, and sites of ethical and political contestation in domains ranging from poverty alleviation and education to health and environmental justice. By synthesizing insights across multiple religious traditions and development contexts, the study contributes to the literature by foregrounding religion not merely as a development partner, but as a locus for rethinking the normative foundations of sustainability itself. At the same time, the analysis confirms long-standing critiques that religion in development cannot be understood apart from broader dynamics of neoliberal governance, colonial legacies, and unequal power relations.

In dialogue with recent debates on the religion–SDG nexus (Tomalin 2021; Haynes 2024), this study demonstrates that the SDGs constitute a particularly revealing site for examining how religious values, networks, and practices are selectively mobilized within technocratic development paradigms. While existing studies have documented the growing visibility of faith-based actors in SDG implementation, this study adds to the state of the art by critically examining how such engagement often constrains religion’s ethical and political claims, prioritizing service delivery over structural critique. Religious actors frequently step into spaces vacated by weakened states, reinforcing patterns identified in the literature on faith-based welfare provision. Yet, as this analysis shows, such engagement may also reproduce paternalistic relations or align with neoliberal logics that prioritize efficiency, privatization, and measurable outputs over justice and redistribution. The study thus reframes the central challenge not as how to “harness” religion for development, but as how to interrogate and transform the frameworks within which religious engagement is made legible and acceptable.

By drawing together case-based insights from existing research on Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist initiatives, the study contributes a comparative perspective that remains underdeveloped in much of the current literature, which

often focuses on single traditions or regions. Christian health networks in Africa, Islamic charitable infrastructures in South Asia, and Buddhist environmental movements in Southeast Asia illustrate how religious institutions both collaborate with and contest dominant development paradigms. This comparative synthesis advances existing work by showing that religious engagement with development is neither uniformly instrumental nor uniformly transformative, but characterized by a productive tension between pragmatism and critique.

The study further contributes to post-development and pluriversal debates (Kothari et al. 2019; Demaria and Kothari 2020; Demaria et al. 2023) by demonstrating how religious imaginaries can expand dominant conceptions of “progress.” Rather than framing global challenges solely as technical problems requiring policy solutions, religious actors often recast them as moral and existential questions concerning care, responsibility, and relationality. In doing so, the study positions religion as an important – though under-theorized – source of alternative development imaginaries that resonate with decolonial, feminist, and ecological critiques of mainstream development. This represents a key conceptual contribution beyond existing instrumental accounts of faith-based development.

At the same time, the analysis aligns with critical scholarship that cautions against romanticizing religious agency. Faith-based actors may reproduce exclusions along the lines of gender, sexuality, caste, or ethnicity, legitimize authoritarian politics, or depoliticize inequality by aligning closely with donor agendas. By explicitly foregrounding these ambivalences, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of religion as a dynamic field of contestation rather than a coherent moral force. This emphasis responds directly to calls in the literature for more reflexive and power-sensitive analyses of religion in development.

Looking ahead, this study underscores the need for future research and policy to move beyond instrumental metrics of religious “effectiveness” and to engage more seriously with the epistemological, ethical, and political dimensions of religious agency. Rather than treating faith-based organizations as convenient service-delivery mechanisms, scholars and practitioners must recognize them as moral interlocutors and social actors whose visions of justice may challenge dominant paradigms. This represents a shift from evaluating religion’s contribution to development toward examining how religion reshapes the very terms of development debates.

Finally, by centering questions of justice, inclusion, and accountability, this study contributes to broader interdisciplinary conversations on transformative sustainability. Religious communities’ deep embedding in everyday life

gives them a distinctive capacity to mobilize solidarity, articulate resistance, and enact alternatives. The key contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that religion's role in sustainable development is best understood not as supplementary to technocratic frameworks like the SDGs, but as a critical site where alternative futures are imagined, negotiated, and contested. In moving toward transformative religious futures, engaging religion critically – rather than idealizing or instrumentalizing it – remains essential for advancing sustainable development grounded in equity, care, and collective flourishing.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers of *Religion and Development* for their careful reading of the manuscript and for their insightful and constructive comments, which significantly improved the quality and clarity of this article. Any remaining errors are the sole responsibility of the authors. The authors used AI-based language assistance tools to support editing, clarity, and stylistic refinement of the manuscript. The AI tools were not used to generate original ideas, arguments, data, or analyses. All intellectual content, interpretations, and conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors.

Research Ethics

This study is based on qualitative and documentary research. Where human participants were involved, the research was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for social research.

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A Web of Underlying Drivers of Intimate Partner Violence Among African Women in a Christian Congregation in Ghana

Research Article

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Received 6 May 2025 | Accepted 24 March 2026

Published online 2 June 2026

Abstract

This paper explores the conditions driving intimate partner violence (IPV) among Anlo-Ewe Christian women in a protestant mainline church in southern Ghana. The paper utilizes systemic perspectives on qualitative research methods as well as intersectionality theory to abductively analyze the experiences and perspectives of 13 Christian women survivors of IPV and 11 local organizational representatives. The study shows how several contextual conditions connect to shape and sustain women survivors' multiple identities and IPV. This study makes three contributions to ongoing discourses in the research fields of religion and IPV and religion and gender. It contributes to knowledge on the ambiguity of religion in both addressing and contributing to IPV through both reinforcing and challenging gender norms. Second, it also contributes to knowledge on self-perceptions of women survivors as slaves connected to mutually interacting larger social structures of colonialism and globalization. Last, this study reveals the complexity of addressing IPV considering that social actors like the protestant mainline church are part of support networks and the contextual conditions driving IPV. The implications of the findings for research are the need for systemic, intersectional, and open-ended approaches that are inclusive of categories of spirituality, slavery, and colonialism. For practice, the findings imply the need for social actors to be self-critical and to focus on all aspects of social identities and structures

when engaging in social interventions in particular contexts to ensure appropriate interventions.

Keywords

intimate partner violence – gender – intersectionality – Christian faith – identity construction – women survivors of violence – colonialism

1 Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO 2021, xii) maintains that about one in three partnered or ever-married women worldwide experience intimate partner violence (IPV) in their lifetime. IPV is defined as any behavior mostly committed by a male partner in a marriage or in intimate relations against a woman that causes physical, sexual, and psychological harm (WHO 2021, p. 4). In sub-Saharan Africa, IPV against women frequently goes unreported due to stigmatization and the lack of support structures. In view of this, the WHO (2021, 23) reports that 33% of married or ever-married women between 15 and 49 years of age in the region have experienced at least one form of physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. Available records in Ghana indicate that 41.6 percent of women have experienced IPV (GNA 2023). IPV is a social menace attracting perspectives in various fields of research, inter alia, religion and gender (Avishai 2016; Le Roux and Loots 2017) and religion and development (Maseno 2020; Swart and Nell 2016; Chitando et al. 2020), and the ambivalent role played by religion regarding IPV (Robert 2002; Nason-Clark et al. 2018). The current study extends the existing body of literature about religion and IPV. It is based on a PhD study on religion and IPV framed within systemic qualitative research methods. Based on the case of a protestant mainline church (PMC) among the Anlo-Ewe community of Ghana, this paper explores the question *how do Christian female survivors and organizational representatives articulate their experiences of the underlying drivers of IPV?* The paper is structured as follows: First, I provide an overview of religion and IPV in Ghana. This is followed by a presentation of the theoretical approach, then the methodological and analytical approaches in the third and fourth sections, respectively. In the fifth section, I present the findings, and in the sixth, the discussion. The last section concludes with the main findings and implications for research and practice.

2 IPV and Religion in Ghana

Studies attribute IPV to a range of factors, among them poverty, lack of education, gender, lineage ties, cultural practices, and religion. Poverty and women's economic reliance on men are risk factors that trigger IPV (Lambert and Firestone 2000; Sedziafa et al. 2017). According to the World Bank, Ghana's poverty rate has increased since 1990 and is projected to peak at 31.5% in 2025 until 2026,¹ implying a downward trend in Ghana's economy. In fact, 21.4% of Ghana's national population is considered severely poor, while 31% are vulnerable to multidimensional poverty (GSS 2020). This suggests a possible increase in the levels of IPV against women. Connected to poverty is education. Studies point to men's and women's low levels of education as significant factors underlying (physical) IPV (Darteh et al. 2021; Ola 2022; Pierotti 2013). Another factor is lineage ties. There are two main lineage groups in Ghana, distinguished by ethnicity, inheritance, and naming systems. The Anlo-Ewe, a patrilineal group among whom this study was conducted, inherit and name via the male line. According to Sedziafa et al. (2018) and Asiedu (2016), women from such groups are 1.4 times more likely to experience physical IPV because of limited access to support networks. This is different from women from matrilineal groups such as the Ashantis who practice inheritance and naming through the female line. In addition, gender, patriarchy, and masculinity constructions (Dery 2021, 2019; Adinkrah 2012), social expectations regarding gender roles, fear of divorce, and the social stigma of violence encourage the perpetration of IPV, dissuading female victims from seeking help (Rohn and Tenkorang 2024; Dako-Gyeke et al. 2019). This highlights how the power of patriarchy and gender norms reinforce women's vulnerability and hinder their agency.

Moreover, cultural marriage practices, popularly known as the brideprice, are said to shape cultural but also gender identities and contribute to IPV against women (Ademiluka 2021; Adjei and Mpiani 2018). The content and cost of the brideprice vary across families and communities in Ghana and Africa (Owusu-Gibson 2023; Ngutor et al. 2013). Ghanaian anthropologist Godwin Kwaku Nukunya (1969, 96–97) thinks the brideprice confers rights on the husband over his wife's sexuality. Some authors think this conferment connotes control over a woman's sexuality and enslaves her to culture (Oduyoye 1995, 136). Others think it is likened to prostitution and marital enslavement

1 See "The World Bank in Ghana," <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ghana/overview>.

(Mangena and Ndlovu 2013). Siwan Anderson (2007, 170) writes that while, in theory, the brideprice may be interpreted to mean recognition of a woman's worth and productivity, in practice it has been linked to women's limited autonomy over their bodies and to domestic violence.

Religion is globally sometimes perceived as a powerful institutional force of limitation, oppression, and violence, and at the same time a space of welcome, empowerment, and resistance for women and individuals (Alcidi et al. 2023; Shaw and Garvin 2021; Stiles-Ocran 2021; Nason-Clark et al. 2018; Le Roux 2019; Petersen 2016; Kubai 2007). Authors admit that religion is not an easily defined concept. However, it is, in the African conception, understood as a way of life that encompasses a combination of the spiritual, sacred, physical, and social realms of life (David Stiles-Ocran 2023; Awoonor 2006; Mbiti 1990). In this study, religion refers to Christian faith, theologies, and practices in institutional and individual life. These dimensions of religion emerged in the narratives of the informants in this study. The varied role of religion and Christian faith communities and leaders and their response or lack of response to violence against women and girls in the African context have been identified (Parsitau and Aura 2021; Le Roux et al. 2016). For example, within West African societies such as Nigeria, patriarchal interpretation of biblical verses is known to undermine women's dignity, subdue them to men, and culminate in their experiences of IPV (Diala 2024). Strict adherence to marital vows in the Christian Church in Nigeria compels women to stay in abusive marriages at the cost of their lives (Afunugo 2025). Women victims' perceptions of support received from religious leaders are also, most often, unsatisfactory (Ezema et al. 2023).

In Ghana, where the majority identify with Christianity (71.3%) amidst Islam (19.9%) and traditional and other religions (GSS 2021), this high religiosity and Christian majority presence presuppose that individuals are likely to fall on churches for support in times of crises. These churches are involved in the daily lives of people and in crisis situations such as IPV, inspiring this research on religion and IPV. There are numerous church traditions, including the PMC at the center of this study, a European missionary church located in the Volta Region and in several other regions of Ghana. The Volta Region is largely inhabited by the Ewe, the third largest among Ghana's 75 ethnic groups (GSS 2021). It is a patriarchal society with a gendered culture that potentially subdues and silences women (Mutimukuru-Maravanyika et al. 2017). The Anlo-Ewe are a subgroup of the Ewe people. They speak the Anlo dialect, which distinguishes them from other Ewe-speaking groups. However, they share a common culture and see themselves as one people (Venkatachalam 2012). As a native-born and speaking member of this ethnic group, I have observed, as

in other research (Stiles-Ocran 2020), that the male dominance of this group often tends to silence women in both marriage and public life, where the relationship between the sexes is oftentimes asymmetrical.

3 Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on a PhD study framed within systemic perspectives on qualitative research methods. It employed feminist intersectionality theory to learn and analyze the factors driving IPV. Intersectionality is a critical social theory originally employed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s as a metaphorical concept. It is valuable in analyzing the link between social structures, social identities, and the ideas that produce them, allowing for a comprehensive approach to explain and address social problems (Collins 2019). Crenshaw uncovered the prejudice Black and Colored Women faced with the legal system in the USA based on their gender and racial identities. She revealed the inadequacies conceptions of gender, race, and class pose as separate phenomena when attempting to understand and solve social inequalities in particular social contexts (Collins 2019). Feminist intersectionality theory rejects binary categorizations. Instead, it embraces epistemologies that prioritize the experiences of marginalized persons, acknowledging their identity categories as fluid, irreducible, and inclusive (Carastathis 2014; Bowleg 2008).

Intersectionality was used in the 1990s in several ways and contexts as a concept, theory, framework, paradigm, and heuristic device (Collins 2019). Feminist intersectionality theory provides a way for conducting a comprehensive analysis through a multilevel and cross-sectional approach. This approach helps to uncover how various identity categories mutually and simultaneously interact with social structures and victimize and oppress women over time (Hankivsky 2014; Cooper 2016). In the African context, Mercy Amba Oduyoye is quoted to have asserted that women's experiences of oppression are global but it "wears different clothes and speaks different languages in Africa and other southern continents" (Rakoczy 2004, 16). African women theologians have used intersectionality to analyze gender and other categories of oppression such as culture and religion relevant to African women (Kanyoro 2002; Oduyoye 1995).

Relating to the intersection of the so-called brideprice and women's experiences of IPV and enslavement,² this study is not on the brideprice. However,

2 An extensive body of literature on slavery points to how African marriage practices were used in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa by self-serving individuals to perpetuate

it is necessary, as it emerged in the empirical analysis, to highlight some history of the brideprice to enable a further discussion on how it connects to the survivors' self-perceptions as slaves. Alessandra Brivio (2017) attributes women's enslavement to ethnocentric and Eurocentric misinterpretations of the Ghanaian (then the Gold Coast) social custom of bridewealth, like the European dowry. This European dowry, defined as debt repayable by a woman's family if she left her husband, stigmatized women. Western feminists have posed questions about the potential equivalence between slavery and marriage. This is because of the vulnerability and inequality women generally and married women particularly experience. Women's experiences invoke analogies of women as slaves related to colonial debates around this brideprice or bridewealth (Quirk and Rossi 2022) and dowry (Getz and Ehrisman 2015). My perception as an African scholar is that African cultural marriage practices are not (and should not be seen as) equivalent to slavery. To say this would be a hasty generalization. However, when contemporary Ghanaian married women survivors refer to brideprice and related dominant discourses and describe their marital experiences as slavery (I will come back to this later), these empirically based discernments call for critical reflections about colonial legacies and their effects on Ghanaian women's experiences of IPV and slavery in marriage.

This study employed intersectionality. The idea of using intersectionality suggests an intricate connection of geography, historical experiences, socio-cultural worldview, Christian faith, gender locations, and other factors in the oppression of a Ghanaian Christian woman. Intersectionality served as a flexible tool in the analysis. It helped recognize the limitations of using certain provisional categories like gender, race, and class (Collins 2019). Using these categories may not fully reflect the specific experiences of research informants. But in the context of this study, it helped to focus on the stories and language of the informants, to avoid forcing specific categories in the analyses, and to be open and to recognize new identities and social structures (Collins 2019, 34–41).

4 Methodology

Systemic perspectives on qualitative research is a methodology derived from health practice (Collen 2003). Family therapists in Italy maintained that

experiences of domestic slavery for groups of women such as free wives, and slave wives even after the abolition of slavery (e.g., Quirk and Rossi 2022; Getz and Ehrisman 2015; Stiles-Ocran and David forthcoming).

individual symptoms can be treated by studying their connections to family belief systems and interpersonal interactions (Lorås et al. 2017). Systemic perspectives on qualitative research, therefore, assumes people's challenges are intertwined with social structures and contexts and leans on intersectional frameworks to analyze individual problems (Collen 2003; Lorås et al. 2017; Duvvury et al. 2021). It integrates the subjects of an inquiry, centers the marginalized, and underscores them as experts in the knowledge of their experiences. The associated methods accept differences and include various viewpoints to better understand human experiences and tackle different aspects of a problem in search of alternative solutions (Larkin et al. 2019; Guo et al. 2021). The flexibility in the use of systemic perspectives on qualitative research methodology (Lorås et al. 2017) enabled its application in this current study on religion and IPV in Ghana. Its element of multiplicity allowed for the inclusion of diverse informants.

The exploratory nature of this study is not intended to be representative, but to give a deeper understanding of the situation of Christian survivors of IPV. It primarily focused on a small group of Anlo-Ewe Christian female survivors between 18 and 65 years of age. Supplementary information from organizational representatives (below "reps") – from the PMC (2 male, 4 female), Christian faith-based organizations (CFBOs) (3 female), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) (1 female), and a government organization (1 male) – was also included. The inclusion of non-PMC reps was based on their extensive work and experience with IPV cases, and sometimes with religious organizations. It was necessary to rely on this form of data to understand and build the categories and illuminate the contextual conditions surrounding the survivors' lives. Regarding the survivors' religious identities, they all self-identified as Christian women members of the PMC and had no seminary or theological education. Participants included pastors' wives and deaconesses, but most were lay Christians with no leadership positions in the church. All of them were mothers. They were either married, divorced, widowed, or separated from their spouses. They had different formal educational backgrounds, ranging from none or junior school through to teacher training and a bachelor's degree. Their educational statuses reflect their occupations and economically vulnerable positions. Except for a few who were teachers, the majority were petty traders.

Gatekeepers, snowball techniques, and a group Bible study were utilized to gain access to the milieu and to 24 informants – 13 survivors and 11 organizational reps. They were recruited from urban and rural areas – Greater Accra and Volta – in southern Ghana. Greater Accra is a cosmopolitan center, home to diverse ethnicities, including the Anlo-Ewe. Three survivors were recruited from there, along with three non-Anlo-Ewe CFBO reps. All other informants

were Anlo-Ewe from the Volta Region. Data were obtained through in-depth individual interviews (Charmaz 2014, 135) (face-to-face and phone) with nine survivors and one focus group interview with four survivors. Supplementary information from the 11 organizational reps was garnered through ten face-to-face and one digital (MS Teams) interviews. Interviews and follow-ups were conducted in English or Anlo-Ewe between March 2022 and January 2023. Ethical approval was sought before the study commenced from the PMC's headquarters and Sikt.³ After obtaining the informants' informed consent and assuring them of confidentiality, the interviews were conducted and recorded on audiotape and deleted after verbatim transcription. All data were anonymized with pseudonyms to protect the informants.

Informants shared their experiences of IPV, including perceived causes, methods of support, and their views on these experiences. The data were analyzed in two stages both within and across each transcribed interview. First, transcripts were read and manually coded line by line, then organized in the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to identify actions, meanings, and processes. Next, codes were compared and grouped, using memos, into tentative categories and subcategories as more data were collected. Using intersectionality helped me to focus on the survivors' language to uncover new concepts. It also allowed me to explore how various forms of IPV – such as physical, sexual, and economic abuse along with their effects such as dehumanization, humiliation, disability, child death, and threats to survivors' lives – relate to the survivors' social identities and the social structures they believed contributed to IPV. Finally, relationships among the codes, the categories, and the subcategories were interpreted, with some grouped under a first main category called “systemic realities,” which included four subcategories: sociocultural and gender norms, economic factors, religion, and informal social support networks.⁴ All the codes and categories were finally grouped around a core category.

The second stage focused on this current paper and followed the steps indicated earlier in the first stage. Transcripts from the survivors were first reread to identify undercoded data. The subcategories coded under systemic realities were used as predetermined codes and further developed with inductively coded data from the organizational reps. Some new codes, like lifetime experiences of violence, “because of my children,” colonialism and globalization, and problems of accessibility and coordination among sector organizations, were

3 Sikt is the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, responsible for general data protection. Sikt is involved because I was a PhD candidate in Norway.

4 The analysis of a second main category is published in an earlier article (Elorm Stiles-Ocran 2023).

identified and submerged into existing categories. The survivors' social identities were also analyzed and grouped into multiple identity categories and juxtaposed with the structural conditions. In the last step, some categories were reviewed based on feedback from various academic settings. The results of the analyses are presented in the subsequent sections.⁵

5 Findings: Identifying Systemic Realities Driving IPV

Findings from the empirical analyses suggest that IPV against a heterogenous group of Anlo-Ewe Christian women does not occur in isolation. It is embedded in interconnecting systems of gendered sociocultural norms, religious ideologies, colonialism and globalization, and regress social support networks.

5.1 *Gendered Sociocultural Norms*

Gendered sociocultural norms are norms pertaining to women and men in general, and to the married women survivors in this study. There were several dimensions to these norms. Two female CFBO reps noted norms of masculinity, power, and control as among the underlying factors driving IPV. One said, "At the base of IPV is this notion that, 'I have power over you, and I can exercise it the way I want to. I have control over you'" (Shine). This control reflects survivors' marital lives. In the words of Aku (survivor, lay Christian, widow, and trader with senior high education), "the beating all come from the controlling. He over-controlled me ... they said [meta-narratives] a woman has to respect her husband. But today, it's like you become a football for men. They saw us like we are a stone." Aku's perception shows the social demands on her to respect her husband. When her husband perceives a lack of such respect, it results in excessive control and violence. Mawusi (survivor, lay Christian wife, and uneducated trader) narrated how her husband subscribes to these norms to inflict pain and silence her whenever she expresses herself:

The first time he beat me; it was because I caused it ... he had gone to sleep with another man's wife. It pained me! So, I used to talk about it ... He says he is a man and so if he wants to marry 20 women, he has the right to. But it is not right for a woman to marry two men. He made his own law for himself.

5 To make my intersectionality analyses visible, I place different identities of the survivors in parentheses when presenting the findings.

Secondly, informants identified several dimensions of gender-based exclusion of women and wives. One relates to decision-making on many levels. For example, Eli (survivor, lay Christian, uneducated trader), who was separated from her partner at the time of the interview, disclosed that “The man will say he is the head ... As a woman when a man is speaking, we should obey. He wanted to give me medicine to drink to abort the pregnancy.” This implied she had no right to decide on issues related to her sexual and reproductive health as a wife. Another exclusion relates to education.⁶ This gendered exclusion from education in Ghana (Asare-Danso 2017) may help understand the educational statuses of the survivors in this research and their husbands’ attitudes as reflected in their narratives. A male PMC rep (Kwame) explained that generally, rather than educating women, gender socialization and roles historically confined girls and women to the home as childbearers and caregivers. Meanwhile, men were educated to become breadwinners, creating a dependency syndrome which makes women vulnerable to abuse. Also connected to this education is economic independence. As narrated by Koenya (survivor, pastor’s wife but separated, and teacher with training college education), “Most of them [husbands] don’t want their wives to be equal with them ... Men fear that women will not respect them.” By this, she meant her husband’s reactions to her economic independence through further education and other businesses. Such actions of men tend to enforce norms of educational and economic exclusion of women.

A third dimension relates to marriage privacy, where interventions are perceived as unwarranted. According to female PMC rep Pat, “the way traditionally we react to some of these issues ... marriage is something that couples can address on their own.” Connected to this is a fourth dimension concerning norms of divorce perceived as failure and where divorced women and wives are blamed and stigmatized. This was emphasized by PMC rep Pat:

Nobody wants to associate themselves with failure ... It’s the way society views them ... when it [marriage] doesn’t go the way they want, sometimes they [couples] find it difficult to come back and say it didn’t work well.

It seems that these norms of marriage privacy and social stigmatizations affect adequate responses in the event of IPV and also obstruct survivors from seeking help.

⁶ It used to be the case in Ghana’s educational system that girls, compared to boys, were largely excluded from education. However, Ghana’s educational reforms have intensified the enrolment of girls in schools since 1997 (Danso, Seth Asare 2017).

It was also found that motherhood is a complex identity for African women when, on the one hand, women who suffer from infertility face social stigmatization for not giving birth, which may lead to divorce (Oduyoye 1995, 50; Owusu-Gibson 2023, 67). On the other hand, women are often blamed when their children do not meet social ideals, which puts pressure on them to fulfill their roles as mothers regardless of the challenges (Stiles-Ocran 2021, 183–185; Owusu 2016, 30; Oduyoye 2004, 58). For one of the survivors, who is a mother and an educated pastor's wife, the dilemma this divorce stigma, marriage privacy, and motherhood pose for her is complex. In her words, "I'm enduring. ... broken home ... the children will, will go astray ... As for divorce, I don't want it in my life" (Esinam). Thus, sociocultural and gender norms are used by individuals and society to socialize women and men, silence women, and exclude them from decision-making and thus contribute to normalizing IPV.

In short, the informants' narratives show how dominant gendered sociocultural norms perceive women as inferior to men and create hierarchies where women are kept in subordination. Gender norms define what privileges and constraints women have, stigmatize and potentially compel them to conform, and thus make them vulnerable to IPV.

5.2. *Religious Ideologies*

Religious ideologies pertain to different dimensions of Christian faith related to church and group identity analyzed in the empirical data. One dimension is church theologies related to suffering, divorce, and male headship, characterized by abstract or literal biblical interpretations. This is reflected in the accounts of survivors like Aku (lay Christian, widow, trader with senior high education), who related her 13 years of abuse to abstract theologies that, according to her, do not consider their lived experiences and restrict divorce:

When we go to church, they tell us that ... if God wants to bless us, He allows us to go through difficulties. ... When I was going through the experience at the initial stages, that was how I understood it. That was why leaving that place [abusive home] was not what I thought of ..., they [church] didn't really support divorce.

Also, two survivors (married women deaconesses), with different levels of education and occupation, claimed that "Among us in this congregation, no one can bring her bedroom into the church" (Enam, junior high education and trader, focus group interview), "because the Bible speaks against it. So, you carry your own cross like Christ carried His" (Ewoenam, training college, teacher, focus group interview). Such theologies relate to enduring suffering, but are not contextualized and potentially constrain and silence women

survivors from seeking help. These likely reinforce the sociocultural perceptions mentioned earlier of the privacy of marriage and divorce.

A second dimension of religious ideologies is popular Christian greetings or slogans taken from the Bible and used among groups of pastors' wives. Female PMC rep Nancy said:

If you talk to the elderly people [senior pastors' spouses], because of fear, they'd say, "look for somewhere to sit ... We want to be at a place where there's peace ... Pastor's spouses' afflictions are many ... "Midodzi le xaxawo me."⁷

Nancy problematized this as one that makes women suffer in silence due to fear, church, and social expectations. The effects of these gendered norms and religious ideologies likely silence and self-silence women, which normalizes IPV and adds to their vulnerabilities. This is reflected in Mansa's (survivor, deaconess, widow, and trader) narrative:

Women in the ... church have a lot of issues they're going through but they're refusing to speak out ... Even among the pastor's wives ... they are going through a lot with their husbands. And because they are pastor's wives, who can they talk to?

A third dimension is belief in spirit beings and their connection to IPV. Some informants interpreted perpetrators' violence as intentional, while others attributed it to spiritual factors such as the devil. Referring to two incidents of femicide at the time of the interview, CFBO rep Shine said:

I'm not saying that the cause is spiritual. Somebody has made their choices. But you can see ... the devil loves to play in spaces like that ... It's a very deep stronghold happening there. You can't go and say this in court.

She implied that IPV is related to human choices and spiritual influences. In a related interview, Aku, aside from her perception of abstract church theologies, further revealed, "Sometimes too that [violence] is spiritual thing that is happening ... His [husband's] actions became worse off than before ... He

⁷ *Midodzi le xaxawo me* literally means endure in afflictions. It is a popular greeting among pastors' spouses I heard throughout the time I interacted with them. As I understood from them, it is taken from the biblical text Romans 12:12b and is an example of the selective use of biblical texts for specific purposes.

kept doing it more as if he was possessed.”⁸ As already mentioned, the African worldview is a religious and spiritual one in which good spirits protect and reward the well-behaved and evil spirits harm wrongdoers (Gyekye 1996). This spiritual dimension expands on categories of analyses (Collins 2019). It also challenges dominant development discourses that potentially exclude or tend to ignore religious and/or spiritual frameworks, as argued by several authors in the field of religion and development (e.g., Istratii and Ali 2023; Bowers Du Toit 2019). Clearly, religious ideologies in their varied forms of church theologies, popular Christian greetings, and beliefs in spirit beings are not exempt from the discourse on IPV against groups of Anlo-Ewe women.

Furthermore, the interviews uncovered how gendered sociocultural norms and religious ideologies are intricately connected by patriarchal cultural elements. For example, in CFBO rep Beauty’s perception:

The culture both handed down from the source of the word of God and our own culture has ... negative influence on our humanity ... Culture has become a serious stumbling block to the rise of women ... We want our culture to define us as humans.

This quote implies there are patriarchal elements in the African culture that can similarly be found in the Christian church and the Bible. Based on the informants’ accounts, and from an intersectional and systemic perspective, gendered cultural perceptions and religious ideologies are attributed to an intricate web of traditional African and Western Christian cultures, which engender unique and common experiences of oppression (Collins 2019; Kanyoro 2002; Lorås et al. 2017).

5.3 *Colonialism and Globalization*

This category shows how two properties – colonialism and globalization – play out in aspects of survivors’ marriages and family lives and tend to characterize men’s perceptions and self-perceptions of Anlo-Ewe Christian women as slaves. Colonialism is the foreign political domination over other territories for selfish gains (Nkrumah 1965). One dimension related to colonialism is Western cultural discourses and practices. Informants attributed IPV to discourses of brideprice⁹ used in connection to the Anlo-Ewe marriage practice of *tabianu*

8 Spirit possession is a general belief in Africa and in Christianity, where human actions are believed to be controlled and influenced by an alien (S)pirit or demon.

9 This is not a study about the brideprice, but the concept emerged in the narratives of the informants and is therefore discussed here. This brideprice is known to date back to 2000 BCE in Germanic traditions and spread into Mediterranean Western Europe. It is also

and/or *srɔnu*.¹⁰ This practice entails bottles of assorted drinks, assorted cloths, and money offered by a prospective husband to a wife-to-be and her family (Nukunya 1969, 92; Stiles-Ocran 2020, 23; Owusu-Gibson 2023, 22–24). The language of brideprice/bridewealth/dowry is widely used and conceived in most Western and African contexts to mean marriage payment (e.g., Comaroff 1980; Nukunya 1969, 92; Mangena and Ndlovu 2013). Related to this brideprice discourse, PMC rep Nancy said, “Some of the men think that after they have paid the brideprice, you become their property. So, they treat you anyhow.” In the words of four survivors (deaconesses, married/separated, traders/teachers, with different educational statuses from none to bachelor’s degree):

The man feels that he has *bought* [my emphasis in italics] the woman ... because of the things he has *paid* [my emphasis] to the woman in marriage. Some men think that because of those things they paid ... the woman is now their slave. ... Because some men say they are the head, so we have to submit ourselves to them ... they don’t regard you as worthy of expressing your opinions. (Enam, Ewoenam, Selorm, and Akorfa, focus group interview)

These discourses of buying and payment likely enforce gender norms of men as heads over women, whereby survivors think men perceive of them as slaves and exclude and silence them. Consequently, some women perceive themselves as slaves. These experiences can be paralleled to studies on historical slavery when humans were bought and sold as commodities (Perbi 2004; Brivio 2017). Joel Quirk and Benedetta Rossi (2022) note that while colonial authorities and Christian missionaries claimed to oppose historical slavery, some viewed African marriage practices as backward and similar to slavery, thinking

practiced in other ancient civilizations and is prevalent in most parts of Africa (e.g., Ngutor et al. 2013; Hughes 1978; Anderson 2007). Some studies alternate bridewealth and brideprice (e.g., Anyebe 1985). Others seem to think brideprice, bridewealth, and dowry are different practices, as is the case for example in China and Taiwan, where bridewealth and brideprice coexist (e.g., Ngutor et al. 2013, 60). India and parts of South Asia are known to practice the dowry, understood to be a payment by a wife (Anderson 2007). Within Africa, there are different local terms used to refer to this brideprice (e.g., Parker 2015; Rudwick and Posel 2015). There seem to be different terminologies used for the said brideprice among some authors and Africans.

10 *Tabianu* is etymologically derived from the two words *ta*, meaning head, and *bianu*, meaning ask for. *Tabianu* literally means head asks for. *Tabianu* is connected to *srɔnu*, which means wife’s items. *Srɔnu* are nuptial gifts offered as a sign of value and appreciation during the customary practice of *tabianu* when a man requests the hand of a woman in marriage.

they involved the forceful purchase of brides. These discourses, according to Brivio (2017), were used by Europeans to emphasize the economic dimensions of European marriage practices that they observed in some African marriage customs.¹¹ Brivio argued that Europeans' failure to distinguish between cultural practices of pawnship and African cultural marriage practices resulted in the use of dominant discourses. While Europeans pretended to support the abolition, these dominant discourses sustained domestic slavery and portrayed some married women as slaves. Survivors' descriptions of experiences of enslavement in marriage need to be understood in the light of these historical events and prevailing discourses. For example, Mawusi (lay Christian, married, trader with no education) said, "You would think that I am a slave ... One woman will do this and do this [domestic chores] before finally when you go to bed, she gives herself to you [sex]." Also, Esinam (pastor's wife, teacher with bachelor's degree) said:

When you are sick, your husband cannot even prepare light soup for you to drink ... I have to struggle and go to the kitchen and get something for all of us to eat ... I don't even know that I'm married. I just see myself as, errh, some kind of house help in the house.

These accounts reflect men's little to no support or accountability in marriage and family life. This possibly relates to their perceptions of the said bride-price and of their wives as slaves, which leave affected women with feelings of being slaves. Their experiences challenge general conceptions that traditional African marriages were mutual or complementary relationships in precolonial Africa (Mianda 2002; Lang 2020).

Another dimension of colonialism is the adoption of Western practices and patriarchal ideals. These entail Christian marriage, known as a wedding, and a related adoption of marital names. CFBO rep Glory said:

This violence thing has to do with naming. In our ethnic groups, our naming systems are different ... This British thing¹² ... because of the church and because of the Western naming ... I get married. And become

11 Note that these economic dimensions that Europeans observed do not generally relate to African customary marriages. Instead, they are peculiar to indigenous cultural practices of pawning, in which some African women were given out in marriage by their families as pawns to pay off debts, before this practice was abolished (Perbi 2004; Lovejoy and Falola 2003).

12 Ghana was once under British colonial rule until she gained her independence on March 6, 1957.

[husband's name] because of the same Westernization ... Marriage is a woman's civil death ... This was not our custom ... And yet ... a Ghanaian man has become so Westernized, has adopted this patriarchal system because it suits him.

In the interview, Glory related a personal experience of how her maiden name, which was in her original passport, was changed to her husband's name because of visa application issues when she had to travel with her husband, who needed a visa. She further recounted witnessing Ghanaian men insisting that their wives drop their maiden names and take up their marital names.¹³ This naming issue potentially leads to women's loss of identity and vulnerability. In effect, the brideprice discourse and the insistence by some men to adopt marital names in line with British culture likely reinforce unequal and patriarchal views of marriage. This may negatively impact Anlo-Ewe marriages, family life, and women's experiences of IPV.

Closely related to colonialism is the second effect of globalization, characterized by the negative influence of global capitalist structures on local economies (Miedema and Fulu 2018). The analyses of the survivors' narratives find that economic challenges are global issues affecting individual marriages in several dimensions. One effect is that poverty overburdens individual families. Survivors were often affected as they took on additional roles to meet inflated costs of living. This was illustrated in the frustration of Mawusi (wife, mother, and trader with no education), who had experienced high degrees of all forms of abuse. She said:

Things are not easy in the world ... it's not that ... he [husband] has it [money] ... So, it's become a burden for me because now, everything is expensive ... I am everything. School bag, school shoes, vest, trousers [referring to the burden of her children's needs]. At first, when I take 10 cedis, I am able to buy soap, pipe water ... Now, that 10 cedis cannot even buy soap.

13 In most Ghanaian cultures, children are given names that identify with the specific days they are born. For example, a girl born on a Saturday is named Ama or Ami. She is also given other names that signify personhood and autonomy, as well as family names that identify with lineage groups. It is these family names that often get to be changed after marriage, although this is not obligatory. Studies maintain that while traditional African names connect the Ghanaian woman to her heritage, this may be changed due to colonization, assimilation, or personal choice (e.g., Nkansah and Bonsu 2024). Other studies maintain that this name change, until recently, was strongly upheld in English-speaking countries such as Britain (e.g., Peters 2018).

Her experience supports claims about the trickling negative effects of globalization on local economies, families, and women's IPV (Miedema and Fulu 2018).

Ghana's poverty situation (GSS 2020) and the World Bank's projections of Ghana's downward economy mentioned earlier might be helpful considerations in understanding these global–local dynamics. Postcolonial arguments might also help understand the colonialism–globalization dynamics and the global–local dyad. Postcolonialists have argued about an inextricable connection between race and class, which are deeply entrenched in colonial legacies of global capitalist structures in post-independence Ghana and Africa. These capitalist structures were established by the colonial West, which exploited Africans under the guise of Christianity and civilization (Chitando 2020). Postcolonialists further argue that because African elites aligned themselves with foreign capitalist interests, their actions together with Western exploitations perpetuated class divisions that marginalized poor middle-income working-class men in Africa (Nkrumah 1965, 1970; Chitando 2020).

A second effect is that modern globalization trends of poverty disable men's socially accepted positions as providers. As a PMC rep noted, "Economic situations can also cause that where, for example, the male partner is unable to provide as required ... Sometimes ... they are in denial and the denial results in the partner abusing the other partner" (Pat). This illustrates how economic challenges affect men, particularly those with low education and income (Darteh et al. 2021; Ola 2022). IPV can occur across all socioeconomic levels and often widens the gap between rich and poor working-class men (Kimmel 2003). When poor working-class men cannot provide for their families, it challenges social expectations and masculine norms of men as breadwinners (Dery 2019), potentially making women, especially dependents, more vulnerable.

A third dimension, which also connects to colonialism, is the changing character of the said brideprice due to economic challenges. Glory (CFBO rep) noted that its high monetary costs are due to the economic challenges faced by self-serving individuals. In her words,

One boy brought his marriage list to me ... I looked through it and I said, "Is the girl naked?" ... it's like we're selling the girl ... It's like as parents, we were not able to clothe her ... The culture can change ... the ones that don't change, it's because somebody is benefiting ... A lot of it are economic issues.

Several factors in the existing literature explain the rising cost in most African marriage practices today. Among them are colonialism, which introduced a cash system (Adjei and Mpiani 2018). Another factor is the rich social status

of couples and their respective families, which influences how much is given to brides (Ngutor et al. 2013). In addition, there is the need for economic gain by individuals and families of the brides (Tarugarira and Mazambani 2014; Chiweshe 2016). Such individuals and families regulate what is paid in line with current inflation rates and socioeconomic circumstances. It can be implied, therefore, that due to the influence of colonialism and globalization, these actions of individuals and families add extra financial costs and burdens on some individual men, which strengthens the impression of brides as commodities.

Following this is a fourth dimensional effect of exploitation by individual men. PMC rep Kwame shared his experience with male perpetrators who exploit the poverty situation in Ghana and abuse their wives. He said, "When you call the person [perpetrator], he'll just give a flimsy excuse. 'Oh, my business is not flourishing as it used to be, that's why.' But intentionally ..., he's punishing the woman." As found in other studies (Sedziafa et al. 2017), PMC rep Nancy disclosed that this situation is complicated for women who fully depend on such men as sole providers.

Subsequently, the informants' narratives about cold and toxic marriages highlight discourses of male heads and female slaves, reminiscent of a master/slave dynamic. From their perspectives and existing literature, we can argue that these understandings and perceptions have deep-rooted historical and cultural origins. They are likely traced to a mutual interaction of colonialism and the adoption of Western marriage and naming practices, to Western discourses that misconstrue the *tabianu* marriage practice to mean buying wives, and to the influence of global economic structures on local economies. The actions of individual families and men need to be understood in the context of these macro-historical structures.

5.4 *Regress Social Support Networks*

In this paper, I use the concept *regress social support networks* to describe social support systems that are rather weak in their response to issues of partner violence. The concept of regress social support networks relate to the very networks that survivors turn to for help, but which, because they are themselves embedded in the systemic realities that engender IPV, ultimately offer insufficient support and, instead, justify and normalize IPV. This category reveals several dimensions of social support networks and their connection to IPV as analyzed in the empirical data. These networks are important in crisis situations such as IPV. In Ghana, they constitute government-instituted formal social support networks for reporting and addressing abuse. One example is the Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit (DOVVSU) of the

Ghana Police Service, and other legal structures. They also include informal social support networks of friends, families, and churches. Formal social support networks were scarcely mentioned in the narratives of most informants. Their absence and weakness can be explained in the words of CFBO rep Shine. She revealed this is due to related problems of institutional capacity, training resources, coordination among sector organizations, data management, referral systems, and accessibility due to distance and stigma, as found in other studies (Apatinga and Tenkorang 2022).

However, survivors often critically commented on informal social support networks. Several of their shortcomings were mentioned. Some said they received support in the form of advice, mediation, and financial support from family and friends, but these were oftentimes meagre. As illustrated in Aku's (lay Christian, widow, and trader with senior high education) quote:

Even his own family. They support me with advice. They said they can't help me. Only they don't have to help me. Because I was praying if anyone can help me with some money that I can locate myself with the children.

Moreover, such informal networks are sometimes perceived negatively by survivors and perpetrators as fueling abuse. Female PMC rep Mandy's experience was: "I had a case ... The guy got to the pastor together with the lady, they spoke, came home, he started accusing the lady for exposing him to the church. So, it no longer was physical, it became emotional."

Considering that churches are a form of informal social support network, the interview with some female PMC reps about church support for survivors revealed the church was gender sensitive by instituting mechanisms for reporting abuse, and for counseling.

Notwithstanding, they also admitted that addressing IPV was not prioritized in the church's advocacy through solidarity with women to speak against oppressive structures. The PMC's inadequate responses may be attributed to multiple other issues, aside from the patriarchal theologies earlier identified (section 5.2). First, when asked about recorded IPV cases, PMC rep Pat disclosed: "We don't have any data. But it's the data that will tell us whether this is an issue we should pay attention to or not." Second is women's exclusion from key positions in the PMC. Pat explains:

Women are always in high numbers in the church ... even play more roles ... In terms of decision-making, that's where perhaps, if there are more males who might feel a bit more educated, then they influence the committee ... they can have their voices heard more.

This quote reveals how survivors' inability to make decisions in their homes is also reflected in the church space. This is due to exclusion based on gender and education, as already seen (section 5.1). Despite women's numerical majority and roles in the church, they are largely excluded from the PMC's all-male top decision-making body. This potentially overshadows women's voices. Third, some survivors were unaware of any church program that addressed IPV and asked, "PMC? And they say they've been giving education to the church members? Or they designed the program and haven't implemented it? No ... Maybe they've planned but the implementation hasn't started" (Esinam).

Fourth, others expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of the counseling provided by inexperienced and unqualified pastors. As revealed in a quote from Koenya (pastor's wife but separated, teacher, with training college education): "Despite that they [husband] are pastors, they have a lot of problems ... They think they have been counseling people, so they know a lot." Fifth, survivors' attempts to speak out were silenced, as implied from the words of one male PMC rep: "I blasted her [survivor]. She said, 'My husband poured hot soup on my head.' I said, '... why should we go that way?' I ... confronted her that she should never voice that ... Because the husband is a renowned person" (Kwame). Sixth, due to concerns related to fear, trust, and confidentiality in overseeing their cases, many survivors expressed reluctance in utilizing existing church structures, as expressed in this quote:

Our church ..., I have not reported my issue to anyone too and I'm not ready to do that ... I don't have that confidence in them ... They talk too much ... So, I'm not just comfortable telling them ... I don't trust them.
(Esinam)

Aside from these six shortcomings of the church experienced by the informants is a quote from Mansa. She said: "If you put your hopes in someone or in the church, you will not get anything. So, my attention is not there that any help will come from there." This quote expresses experiences with support networks which were common in the narratives of the survivors. In sum, social support networks appear ambivalent despite their expected support in the event of abuse (Asiedu 2016; Anyemedu et al. 2020). Formal networks are lacking due to, inter alia, coordination, accessibility, internal problems of management, and stigmatization. Informal networks are either perceived as maintaining IPV or insufficiently addressing it. As reflected in the specific case of the PMC, survivors and organizational reps point to the lack of intentionality in contextualizing church theologies, advocacy efforts, programs for survivors, sufficient knowledge and skills with counseling and qualified counselors,

safe spaces for abused women to be heard, and in confidentiality in handling abuse cases.

Overall, this analysis shows a web of underlying factors driving and supporting IPV among a group of Anlo-Ewe Christian women in the PMC in Ghana. This paper reveals the complexity when structures of gendered sociocultural norms and religious ideologies reinforce each other. These shape how women and men are perceived, and what obstructions and opportunities they have. These norms find place in marriage and family relationships as well as in social support networks, and influence how the Anlo-Ewe Christian women survivors are responded to. Recognizing the frameworks of the informants' narratives suggested that broader historical structures of colonialism and globalization affect local marriage and family structures. Colonial discourses also shape these local arrangements and different social identities of the women survivors, including emerging self-ascribed slave identities.

6 Discussion

This paper explored the underlying conditions driving IPV against Anlo-Ewe Christian women using the specific case of a PMC in southern Ghana. Three main mutually interacting oppressive conditions are evident. First, gendered sociocultural norms and religious ideologies shaping the survivors' identities. Second, colonialism and globalization configuring local marriage and family arrangements, socioeconomic conditions, and identities. Third, regress social support networks.

6.1 *Gendered Sociocultural Norms and Religious Ideologies*

This study finds that the experiences and identities of a group of Ghanaian-African women survivors are not isolated. Instead, they are configured by socially constructed gender norms, which are reinforced by abstract biblical interpretations and church theologies. These norms and theologies tend to envision women as subordinate to men. Similar to other research (Adjei and Mpiani 2022), informants tell about how individual Christian men, pastors, as well as women subscribe to these religiously prescribed notions, which oppress women and normalize IPV. Spiritual dimensions of IPV characterized by belief in spirit possession of individual male perpetrators adds other layers of complexity. This complexity is reflected, for example, in the life of Aku. Aku attributes her prolonged experiences of varied dimensions and intensities of IPV to multiple factors. She identifies gendered social culture and church theologies and actions as limiting and excluding her on many levels. At the

same time, she identifies spirit possession of her husband as another factor. This spiritual dimension adds ambiguity to her experiences of IPV. Indeed, spiritual dimensions of religion reflect a people's religious and cultural worldview and are relevant for development (Bowers Du Toit 2022). But such conceptions in IPV-related issues, as perceived by Aku and other informants, could prevent holding individual men accountable. They could also limit moral and responsible social interventions for survivors. For these reasons, they cannot be placed under the radar of researchers and social actors.

When religious belief systems intersect with the gender and social locations of these Christian women, they create varied forms of intersectional oppression. This can lead to both unique and common experiences (Bowleg 2008; Collins 2019, 34–41). For example, Esinam, a Christian woman, degree holder, teacher, mother, and a pastor's wife in the PMC, described her experiences as better off than other women survivors because there was no physical IPV. She was considering separation after experiencing sexual denial and emotional and economic IPV. Her experience is compared to Aku, a lay Christian woman, with relatively lower education (senior high), a trader, and a single mother, who had endured high intensities and prolonged sexual, verbal, emotional, economic, and physical IPV, including her child's demise and threats to her own life, before she miraculously escaped her marital home. Although they may share common experiences based on identities as Christian women, wives, and mothers, their experiences of vulnerability may also differ based on the interaction of various social structures and unique identity markers. From the analyses, Esinam has relatively more room to speak and act on some issues in her home than Aku based on her educational and occupational status. Considering identities of motherhood, it can be said that both women enjoy privileged social statuses, given the prevailing gendered sociocultural norms of motherhood and the stigma of infertility in the Ghanaian society (Oduyoye 1995). Motherhood comes with social expectations of giving care to one's biological children. It also comes with added care roles to others depending on social status. For Esinam, additional care – for strangers and those in her immediate community and church – is expected of her not only in the capacity as a Christian woman and mother, but also as a pastor's wife (Adasi 2017). As a pastor's wife, she is perceived as respectable and a privileged woman, and a mother to all by social standards. Abena Kyere (2023) shows how the clergy wife status and education in a specific protestant tradition were and are seen as respectable and privileged. This was because girls were trained and educated during colonial times, in Western mission schools, to be good wives to clergymen and mothers in their homes, according to Western sensibilities. Despite this perceived respect and privilege of the clergy wife, it does not guarantee

Esinam immunity from IPV. By comparison, Aku, who is neither a pastor's wife nor highly educated, does not enjoy the privileges and respect that Esinam would normally enjoy, even though she is also a mother. Thus, motherhood adds complexity to survivors' lives.

In fact, these women's lives are woven in a complex web. Both women live in a community and church where society looks up to them as examples of good Christian women and mothers. As a pastor's wife, the expectations are higher for Esinam compared to Aku, whose husband is neither a pastor nor in the PMC. Like other women in the PMC, Esinam is unable to freely speak up publicly, especially because her abusive husband is a pastor in the PMC. When women in her position attempt to speak up, they are silenced by individual patriarchal men. Paradoxically, Esinam enjoys some privileges, and endures a lower degree of IPV due to her higher education, occupation, and related income than Aku does. At the same time, she experiences pain that is exclusive to her social situation as a pastor's wife, despite this supposed privileged status. Esinam's situation exemplifies the Protestant model of the pastor's wife and family as a role model and may be seen as a problematic colonial heritage. Her experience supports claims that Western forms of colonial Christian education succeeded in entrenching gender identities and domesticating women under the guise of a good woman (Kyere 2023).

6.2 *Colonialism and Globalization*

The experiences of the Anlo-Ewe Christian women survivors in this study show that their lives cannot be understood simply from a gender perspective. Nor can they be understood from a single viewpoint of slave identity. The covert self-ascribed slave identity in their narratives transcends gender and adds another layer of complexity to the survivors' lives. It illustrates how personal struggles are likely connected to broader structures of colonialism and globalization to create multiple oppressions (Collins 2019; Hankivsky 2014; Dube 1997; Cooper 2016). Adjei and Mpiani (2018) attempt to connect women's experiences of IPV to colonialism and the brideprice by arguing that the brideprice became monetized due to the influence of British colonialists in Ghana. However, they do not show how colonialism has sustaining effects on irreducible and self-imposed slave identities connected to the brideprice, as emerged in the survivors' narratives.

This current study suggests that this slave identity is, arguably, linked to these women's geographical location, and to Ghana's encounter with the West and her historical experiences with slavery. Some British Europeans attempted to erase the Africans' culture by imposing their own culture (Green 2002; Brivio 2017; Egeh 2021). They employed terminologies such as brideprice (Ngutor et al.

2013; Adjei and Mpiani 2018) and dowry to describe African marriage rituals, effectively maintaining domestic slavery in the aftermath of the abolition of colonial slavery (Brivio 2017). Brivio (2017, 4) points out that the lines between slavery and marriage, in colonial times, were blurred. Ghanaian men adopted the British perception of marriage, claiming their rights over their wives on the basis that they had *paid* the dowry. They stigmatized their wives by calling them slaves to remind them of their lack of rights (Brivio 2017, 31–32). Ewe free women were specifically exploited by their husbands for their reproductiveness and economic productiveness due to patriarchy. Their experiences were akin to Ewe slave women, except that Ewe slave women faced double exploitation (Brivio 2017, 34). These postulations suggest that the European understanding of marriage embraced by the men did not contribute to the betterment of the Anlo-Ewe women. Therefore, when postcolonial Anlo-Ewe Christian women like Mawusi in this study describe their marital experiences as domination, exploitation, and slavery, their narratives evoke discourses and images of slave wives. They suggest extra expectations and exploitation. These contemporary developments cannot simply be analogies as some studies attempt to draw (Quirk and Rossi 2022; Getz and Ehrisman 2015), but are realities that form a part of these women's everyday experiences.

Although the informants did not directly allude slavery to these Western systems of colonialism and globalization in our interactions, they could be inferred from their reflections about their marriage, family life, and self-ascribed slave identities directly pointing to the brideprice. Henceforth, my arguments relate to the brideprice both as a transaction and a discourse related to marriage payment ideologies used to describe the Anlo-Ewe marriage practice of *tabianu* and/or *srɔnu*. According to the informants, men perceive *tabianu* as paying for and owning their wives as property. Here, I build my arguments by recalling certain claims about the transactional dimensions and origins of the brideprice. As some authors hold, there were customary marriage practices or rituals in Africa – different from the British European marriage transactions in which European wives were subordinate and in unpaid labor – prior to the advent of European and Christian missionaries (Nave 2017; Brivio 2017). Others also claim that the brideprice transaction, which is now a norm in sub-Saharan Africa, originated from ancient Germanic traditions and spread throughout Western Europe (Hughes 1978; Anderson 2007; Ngutor et al. 2013). Furthermore, there are claims that the monetary elements of the transaction in Africa today, particularly in Ghana, were introduced by British colonialists (Adjei and Mpiani 2018). Moreover, colonialism is said to have significantly disrupted African cultures, imposing, among others, European ideals of modernization, gender relations, and practices of domination on

Indigenous Africans (Green 2002). Altogether, these studies provide evidence of changing marriage practices in several parts of contemporary Africa. Given these established facts, it presupposes that when Europeans came to Ghana, they came with their cultural practices, including marriage transactions of the brideprice, which were likely inculturated into some African cultures (Russell 2004). I concur that this brideprice is therefore a transactional practice that is alien to traditional African societies (Meekers 1992; Tarugarira and Mazambani 2014; Adjei and Mpiani 2018), particularly to the Anlo-Ewe marriage practice of *tabianu* and/or *srɔnu*.

Following this, I daresay that the discourses of brideprice and marriage payment predominantly used by several scholars in reference to African marriage practices (e.g., Nukunya 1969; Meekers 1992; Mangena and Ndlovu 2013) are also foreign to the Anlo-Ewes, and possibly to most Africans' interpretations of their marriage practices before the colonial encounter. As a native speaker, there is nothing in the etymological understanding of *tabianu* or *srɔnu* that suggests marriage payment or wife purchase. Anlo-Ewe cultural marriage practices are not to be understood as transactional deals. These brideprice and marriage payment discourses are colonial legacies and emulations reflecting in the everyday language of most Africans. From my empirical analyses, they are not theologically imposed. They are colonial legacies intentionally and unintentionally employed by individual self-serving postcolonial male subjects to exploit their wives. Such use of discourse, as I agree with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), is a colonial culturalist imposition of a foreign language and a ploy to control African people's wealth and culture by controlling their minds and their tools of self-definition in relation to others. It is high time Africans decolonize their minds (Ngũgĩ wa 1986), including their educational systems, to change these misleading narratives that shape self-ascribed slave identities.

The alluded brideprice transaction and the related discourses of marriage payment and owning wives as properties, as they emerged in the informants' narratives, tend to disrupt the foundation of traditional African marriage and family systems and relations, believed by some authors to be complementary rather than asymmetrical (Mianda 2002; Lang 2020; Kyere 2023). As the survivors in this study suggest, men capitalize on these supposed marriage transactions and related discourses to enforce masculinity norms and patriarchal positions, which exclude women and sustain IPV and self-perceptions as slaves. The consequences are devastating for these women, who trace their lineages to men in patrilineal systems where there is a lack of support for women (Oduyoye 1995; Anderson 2007; Chiweshe 2016; Asiedu 2016; Dlamini 2022).

Furthermore, my analyses show that there are also economic dimensions of globalization linked to colonialism. This linkage possibly explains the relation

between poverty, changing marriage practices, women's self-ascribed enslaved positions in marriage, and the resultant IPV. Like other studies (Sedziafa et al. 2017), this study suggests that poverty is likely to encourage IPV, leading to higher rates of violence among uneducated married women – petty traders and mothers like Mawusi, in contrast, for example, to Esinam – who are compelled to depend on men for the family's upkeep. We can infer that this economic dependence is connected to Africa's contact with Western Christian colonial missionaries. Leticia Oduro Asante (2018, 81; c.f. Danso 2017) writes that Bremen missionaries in Ghana provided men with formal Western and vocational education, while women were trained by missionary wives in European-style household skills like housekeeping, laundry, and childcare. These discriminatory forms of Christian formal education, supported by colonial legislation, institutionalized gender inequality and sexism. The result is a small number of women in paid work (Mianda 2002; Afisi 2010; Lang 2020; c.f. Kyere 2023). This small proportion of women in paid work is a trend reflected in most of the survivors' educational and economic statuses and related high levels of abuse. Norms that perceive educationally successful women as disrespectful often restrict women like Esinam, whose husband exploitatively prevented her from pursuing higher education. Esinam interprets men's actions as a fear of women's progress, which keeps women in subordination. Such resistance from men is a fear of losing control (Elorm Stiles-Ocran 2023).

Still on poverty related to structural systems of colonialism and globalization, I earlier indicated that Nkrumah's class analysis – although it lacked a gender perspective – showed how capitalist neocolonial structures created class divisions among African men. In Michael Kimmel's (2003, 604) observations, "globalization disrupts and reconfigures traditional neocolonial ... local economic, political and cultural arrangements, and thus transforms local articulations of both domestic and public patriarchy." It follows, therefore, that such economic challenges of poverty of some Ghanaian families (GSS 2020), as this study also finds, would have negative implications on dominant local gender orders in marriage and family structures where masculinity constructions equated with wealth, status, control, and "power over" persist (Adinkrah 2012; Dery 2019). Some of these norms are sometimes traversed by enlightened women survivors like Esinam who make efforts to improve their economic situation via education. But some men feel their socially ascribed positions threatened, and use violence as a means of control to unleash their frustrations.

6.3 *Regress Social Support Networks*

Formal and informal social networks perceived to be relevant support for abused women (Anyemedu et al. 2020) are, in this study, largely absent and

biased. On the one hand, the survivors did not directly experience formal social support networks such as the DOVVSU because of institutional problems of, *inter alia*, logistics, accessibility, and stigma. Other studies show a lack of political will by governments and a failure to prioritize women's concerns (MoGCSP 2015). According to Saida Hodzic (2009), a historical analysis reveals that government officials in postcolonial Ghana deployed colonial cultural discourses to oppose the passage of the Domestic Violence Bill, which would also have prohibited marital rape. This reflects their desire to maintain the status quo of control over women's sexualities in the family, and thus their patriarchal nature (Walby 1989).

On the other hand, informal social support networks, as experienced by the survivors, are often inadequate and catalyze abuse. This is because they either ameliorate IPV on only a minor scale or exacerbate it through meager or no financial support and poor counseling and mediation. Family systems appear weak, and religion's role in IPV is ambiguous, as found in previous research (Bawa 2019; Takyi and Lamptey 2020; Stiles-Ocran 2021). Although the PMC makes efforts to address IPV through initiating avenues for reporting abuse, they also say that their efforts do not meet the survivors' needs. Abstract and gendered theologies, lack of prioritized engagement in advocacy works, failure to keep track of abuse cases in the PMC, the nature of the counseling, inexperienced counselors, trust and confidentiality issues, power dynamics, and patriarchal structures silence women from naming and shaming IPV. All of these factors inadvertently impede several church initiatives toward gender justice. These shortfalls of the PMC underscore studies that show religion as a gendered institution complicit with oppressive structures in engendering IPV (Ibn et al. 2023; Alcidi et al. 2023; Awadzie and Garr 2021; Le Roux and Loots 2017). In effect, the actions of support networks, as exemplified in this study, can potentially constrain the formulation and implementation of social policies and programs aimed at sustaining families and individual women and men, as well as effectively addressing IPV. These constraints partly explain the lack of social support and the vulnerability of the Anlo-Ewe Christian women in this study. This calls for a rethinking of how we perceive these networks and institutions (Collins 2019, 34–41).

7 Conclusion

This paper set out to explore how Christian female survivors and organizational reps experienced underlying drivers of IPV. As revealed by the informants, IPV is embedded in a complex amalgamation of factors. These factors

include gender norms, church theologies and practices, spiritual beliefs, popular Christian greetings, colonialism and globalization, and the weakness of support networks. Such knowledge is relevant for understanding the complexities around IPV and survivors' lives, which cannot be attributed to just a single phenomenon. This paper contributes to existing knowledge on the ambiguity of religion across dimensions of institutional church theologies and practices, religio-cultural beliefs, and as part of social support networks that both address and contribute to IPV. Second, this study uncovers concepts related to spirituality and self-ascribed slave identities of African Christian women survivors, inter alia, race, sex/gender, class/economic status, education, and religion, connected to IPV. Third, this study reveals that addressing IPV can be limiting and difficult for actors like the PMC, a social support network and also a colonial legacy, which wants to address IPV but is constrained by how it is itself part of the contextual conditions driving it.

The implications of the findings are that imposing dominant or given categories in intersectional analyses of the experiences of Anlo-Ewe Christian women survivors of IPV in postcolonial globalized societies may not adequately encapsulate their experiences and other social identities. This knowledge highlights the crucial need to include concepts of spirituality and slave identity, among other concepts, for holistic research. Regarding practical applications, the findings suggest that social actors must reflect on themselves and the prevailing social structures and identities in a given context for appropriate interventions. This study was conducted among a patrilineal group of Anlo-Ewes in Ghana. One cannot, on this basis, claim that the emergent self-ascribed slave identities of these women and the regress social support networks apply in other patrilineal contexts in sub-Saharan Africa. It is possible, however, that one may find similar or new patterns. This opens up options for further research.

Acknowledgments

This work is part of a PhD project titled *Faith and Agency: The Religious Self-Advocacy of African Christian Women Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence in Local Contexts in Ghana*. The project was funded by VID Specialized University, Oslo (project code 134252). I extend my sincere appreciation to my university, my supervisors Profs. Annette Rose Leis-Peters and Teresa Bue-Kessel, and all the informants who generously shared their perspectives for this study.

Research Ethics

The study was officially reported to and approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt), the body responsible for data protection services, under reference number 163906. Prior to the commencement of the study, the author obtained permission and explicit consent from all informants. All data are securely and temporarily stored on VID's research server and cannot be shared due to their sensitivity.

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Book Reviews





Religious Organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia: Connections to Society and the State, by Carole Rakodi. Routledge Research in Religion and Development. Abingdon: Routledge, 2024. Pp. 310. Hardback: €131.25, ISBN 9781032644677

The book *Religious Organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia: Connections to Society and the State* explores the links between religion, states, social welfare and social change in two different contexts. This work builds on the author's previous volume in the Routledge Research in Religion and Development book series, *Religion and Society in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia* (2019), which offered insights into how religious beliefs, practices and values influence social behaviour and relationships, especially within families.

The author's second volume in the book series focuses on the organisational characteristics of religions and societies in the two contexts. Its ten chapters are divided into three parts. Part I presents the book's conceptual framework that will shape the analysis in the subsequent sections. Chapter 1 plots the purpose and rationale of the book by considering conceptual building blocks that outline the important links between the constituting elements of the research framework. Chapter 2 proceeds with a further development of the analytical framework of the first volume, by analysing the conceptual links between religion, societies and states across the two continents. This leads the author to incorporate religion as both a source of institutions underpinning social relationships and a social field organised at different levels. Chapter 3 develops an understanding of the social role of religious organisations and the increased research interest in this role. These three introductory chapters are of great value to the reader because of their theoretical and conceptual clarification. However, some exposure to the conceptual background presented in the first volume should be considered to fully grasp the content of this second volume.

Part II is subdivided into four chapters that attend to the practical work of religious organisations in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, focusing in particular on their efforts to improve the welfare of people living in those contexts. In Chapter 4 the focus is on Muslim organisations, while Chapter 5 deals with Christian organisations within these regions, tracing traditional and new patterns of social engagement by such organisations. Chapter 6 traces the efforts of Hindu and Buddhist religious organisations, exploring their involvement in social welfare activities. Chapter 7 brings all these different religious traditions together to investigate them as service delivery providers, with a specific focus

on their educational activities. The main question that steers the analysis of these chapters is whether these organisations work as alternatives to or allies of governments. Rakodi makes a concluding remark regarding these organisations, affirming that “the nature and extent of their contemporary educational activities include their religious and philanthropic motivations, financial base and relationships with governments, and external actors, all of which vary between the religious traditions and the contexts in which they operate” (pp. 188–189). The recognition of complexity and great diversity within societies and religious organisations emerges as one of the greatest strengths of this volume. At times, the rich and detailed information offered in each chapter can be overwhelming to the reader. However, at the same time, this wealth of information does a great job in rendering the complexity of human life and societies.

In Part III, Rakodi turns to religious values in relation to development, posing the question whether religious values and organisations resist social change, or rather promote it. Chapter 8 focuses on women’s movements and the involvement of religious organisations and religious values in such movements. In particular, this chapter focuses on family law. Rakodi argues that “changes to individual laws are generally necessary for women’s rights to be realized” (p. 202). As such, she concludes that legal reform should be regarded as an important means for women’s movements to achieve social transformation through strategic actions. Chapter 9 presents an analysis of sexual minorities in the geographical contexts and the work that religious actors do for the social and legal recognition of such minorities. Chapter 10 functions as a summary, bringing the two volumes into conversation by offering a comparative perspective of the five major faith traditions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and some folk religious traditions) and their contribution to development and social change in the respective regions.

This final chapter of the book is particularly effective. The author’s recapitulation of the aim and findings of her long-term research is clear and interpretative, pulling together some of the different strands covered in the chapters and contributing to an insightful synthesis of the book’s rich content. The book argues that to understand the multilevel interaction of religious organisations with politics and society, four domains of religion need to be explored. As Rakodi puts it, these are “discourses and beliefs, practices, the characteristics of religious groups and their organizational agreement” (p. 270). In this respect, furthermore, she registers a number of reasons for the increased research interest in the field of religion and development during the late twentieth and the early years of the twenty-first century. She mentions amongst others

a recognition that secularisation has occurred unevenly, leading to the establishment of governance relationships informed by the ideology of secularisation in most newly independent countries. She also highlights that emerging research brought a new consciousness of the potential of religious organisations as “partners” in achieving development goals, and, for donors, alternative channels for funding. A third motivating reason is the claim by religious actors and others that they have features that distinguish them from governments and secular NGOs. However, the emerging strands of empirical research have also revealed the uneven scope and coverage of the research. In this regard Rakodi mentions: (i) the early lack of a suitable theoretical framework; (ii) the concentration of research on large-scale religious organisations mostly accessible to Northern researchers; (iii) the disproportionate interest in dramatic new trends and new or growing types of organisations; (iv) the preference for researching the latter kind of organisations rather than established ones; and (v) the methodological and practical challenges for comparative research needed to understand different religious traditions and denominations.

This book comes with additional features that support the reading process and facilitate the integration of the detailed content. This includes tables on state – religion relationships, as well as one on services provided by organisations associated with religious traditions in India. It also offers several boxes with case study material in support or clarification of points presented in specific chapters. A structural feature that enhances accessibility for the reader to the content is the grounded overview at the beginning of each chapter, as well as the concluding comments at the end of chapters. Furthermore, endnotes are provided at the end of each chapter, which are helpful, without being excessive. The reference lists at the end of each chapter are impressive. They offer readers and researchers extensive research material. At the end of the book indexes of names, vocabulary and abbreviations are available for consultation.

The book clarifies the key concepts and parameters of the complex and ever-changing nature of religious and societal interaction. It is a must-read for students and researchers interested in the broad field of religion and development, even better if accompanied by the reading of the first volume.

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Stories of Change: Religious Leaders and LGBTIQ Inclusion in East

Africa, by David Kuria Mbote, Barbara Bompani, Adriaan van Klinken, and Damaris Parsitau. London: Zed Books/Bloomsbury, 2024. Pp. 232.

ISBN 9781350415997.

Stories of Change: Religious Leaders and LGBTIQ Inclusion in East Africa (2024) addresses a pressing issue regarding the intersection of religious beliefs, gender and sexual orientation in contemporary African communities. It challenges the common assumption that African religions solely promote homophobia. *Stories of Change* utilises the life stories of twenty-four religious leaders from Kenya and Uganda to demonstrate how faith can create spaces where LGBTIQ individuals and their allies find acceptance and healing, while also opposing discrimination.

In the foreword, theologian Ezra Chitando places *Stories of Change* within the ongoing theological and political struggle for liberation. Chitando argues that the East African context, more specifically Uganda and Kenya, still bears the colonial scars of “Christian values” (xi) promoted by the British Empire. Today, Chitando argues, LGBTIQ people are waging a postcolonial struggle against this so-called value system that denies human dignity not only in terms of gender and sexuality but also in the economic sphere. Additionally, Chitando notes that in the socio-politics of East Africa, religious discrimination is often married to political opportunism (x–xiii). With this context in mind, the *Stories of Change* editors introduce the book to its readers.

The introduction, divided into three sections and written collaboratively by the editors, provides an essential framework for understanding *Stories of Change*. Firstly, the editors give an overview of the context of Kenya and Uganda regarding sexuality and gender in relation to religion, law and colonial remnants. This outline will later help the reader contextualise the stories further. Secondly, the focus shifts to the interventions of religious leaders as agents of social change within the East African setting. Although the emphasis is on religious leaders, local organisations recognising the important role that religion plays in social and political discourse, as well as the need for dialogue to bring about transformation, are becoming increasingly common. Thirdly, the introduction concludes with an explanation of the methodological choice. For the editors, storytelling functions as a dual methodology; it offers “a reflective surface from which we can identify and analyse processes of social change” (:21) and “narrative critique and imagination” (22). After establishing this foundation, *Stories of Change* proceeds to Part One.

The core of the book lies in its twenty-four narratives, divided into two parts: those of LGBTIQ religious leaders and those of allies. Part One specifically presents the stories of LGBTIQ individuals who are spiritual leaders. Each story reveals not only the pain of exclusion but also the joy that comes with inclusion. These stories clearly show that these individuals are called to exist both within and outside their congregations. Often, there is not only an element of worship but also how faith is practically expressed in everyday life, serving as a transformative and life-affirming force for change. These narratives emphasise the importance of life-giving faith and demonstrate how a radical embodiment of being church creates an alternative community centred on care and nurturing, contrasting with conservative beliefs that often preach hatred. What makes this section particularly significant is the diversity of voices – it includes not only gay and lesbian individuals but also trans and gender non-conforming people who live out their callings. This further challenges the silence surrounding gender-diverse individuals, who are frequently marginalised in discourses on sexuality and gender in religion. In Part Two, the stories of allies come to the fore. It is striking that in several of the stories, religious leaders often become more inclusive when they encounter LGBTIQ+ people and begin to read the Bible from a different perspective. In the words of Pastor Stephen: “Before condemning and rebuking, we need to sit at the table and listen to each other” (114). However, it is not only Christian religious leaders who tell their stories, but also Muslim leaders. Sheikh Dawood’s story of inclusivity lies in the fact that the rights of LGBTIQ people are linked to other justice issues, such as HIV and AIDS and children’s rights. For Sheikh Dawood, the protection of LGBTIQ people lies not only in a legal discourse but also in how the Quran is read, interpreted and applied. These stories, grounded in lived experience, challenge the boundaries of orthodox Christian and Islamic theologies by offering alternative visions of spirituality rooted in love, justice and human dignity.

Stories of Change stands as a landmark contribution to African theology and queer studies. It not only broadens the discourse on religion, gender and sexuality but also challenges scholars to rethink the categories through which faith and identity are understood. Furthermore, the book offers a Queer Archive of African religious experience – one defined not by exclusion, but by the radical possibility of love and justice. This book is recommended for undergraduate students in theology and religion, as well as experienced researchers interested in the religious experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals and their allies. Moreover, this book is recommended for religious communities at the crossroads of deciding whether to recognise LGBTQ people as human beings.

I agree with Chitando, who wrote in the forward that *Stories of Change* “serves as a testament and a source of hope: religion can and is surrounding LGBTIQ people in East Africa with love, care, compassion, solidarity and empowerment” (viii).

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Contents

VOLUME 4, NO. 1

EDITORIAL

Religio-Cultural Values, Sustainable Development, and Climate Change 1–8

Philipp Öhlmann and Olivia Wilkinson

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Discursive Constructions of Domestic Corps-Based and International Social Outreach in The Salvation Army: Parallel Universes or an “Integrated Mission”? 11–39

Petra Kjellen Brooke and Emma Tomalin

Religio-Cultural Determinants of Reactions to Climate Change and Related Security Risks in Traditional Religious Communities in Northern Mozambique 40–68

Joram Tarusarira, Gracious Maviza and Giulia Caroli

Building Resilience in the Face of Climate Change: the Case of the Lutheran Church in Southern Madagascar 69–95

Heikki Hiilamo, Zo Ramiandra Rakotoarison and Stephanie Dietrich

POLICY AND PRACTICE NOTE

Findings from a Theology-Informed Training for Ethiopian Orthodox Clergy 99–125

Romina Istratii, Benjamin Kalkum and Henok Hailu

BOOK REVIEWS

Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond, edited by Philipp Öhlmann and Juliane Stork 129–131
Mookgo Solomon Kgatle

VOLUME 4, NOS. 2–3**EDITORIAL**

Religion and Development in Times of Global Crises 133–141
Philipp Öhlmann, Jennifer Philippa Eggert and Olufunke Adeboye

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Empowering Communities: the Impact of *Waqf* on Social and Economic Development 145–162
Aadil Hussain Wagay and Ghulam Nabi

Faith Communities and Socio-Environmental Conflicts in Latin America 163–190
Séverine Deneulin, Maria Paula Barrera and Luiz Felipe Lacerda

Rethinking Religion in Development: Faith, Power, and the Politics of the Sustainable Development Goals 191–212
Titilayo Lydia Bamidele and Seun Bamidele

A Web of Underlying Drivers of Intimate Partner Violence Among African Women in a Christian Congregation in Ghana 213–249
Elorm Ama Stiles-Ocran

BOOK REVIEWS

Religious Organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia: Connections to Society and the State, by Carole Rakodi 253–255
Edward Churchill Orsmond

Stories of Change: Religious Leaders and LGBTIQ Inclusion in East Africa,
by David Kuria Mbote, Barbara Bompani, Adriaan van Klinken, and
Damaris Parsitau 256–258

Hanzline R. Davids