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THE SOCIAL MISSION OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS IN AFRICA: NEW CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

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Abstract. This paper addresses the challenges of state oversight relating to the non-religious activities of religious actors in Africa, whose growing influence allowed them to transform into an alternative to state institutions. In the analysis of this phenomenon, the authors use religious economy theory (religious market), which evaluates a religious organization's competitiveness by its capacity to attract followers. A measurable indicator of such competitiveness is its growing demographic share of a certain religion within a specific region. Using an exponential growth model, the study forecasts the proportions of major religions and their branches in the African population for 2025. It is shown that, as a result of the reduction in the conversion base for Christianity and Islam due to a decrease in the number of followers of ethnic religions, the competition between these religions has increased. Based on the size, the rate of conversion growth, and the specifics of its non-religious activities, the Roman Catholic Church stands out for its high competitiveness in Africa, due to the largest scale of social service in African countries. The research underscores the significant role of social services–education, healthcare, charity, and faith diplomacy–in the mission strategies of these organizations, which allows them to partially fulfill state's social functions. The authors highlight risks associated with the increasing influence of religious organizations, including their use as instruments of foreign influence, trends toward politicization, radicalization, etc. The paper outlines a set of state regulatory mechanisms designed to optimize the positive developmental impact of religious organizations while minimizing associated risks.

Keywords: religious competition, confessional space, Africa, non-religious activities, social mission, state's religious policy, Christianity, Islam

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Africa has historically attracted the attention of world religions with its demographic, socio-economic potential, and high religiosity of the population. Nevertheless, the understanding of the fact that the configuration of the global confessional space will depend on the outcome of religious competition on this continent became obvious only in the second half of the 20th century. Since then, fully evident became the results of the Christian and Muslim missionaries' activities that allowed these religions to occupy the main place in the spiritual life of Africans.

In addition to providing for the spiritual needs of the population, religious organizations have traditionally paid great attention to non-religious activities: social service, economic development, political work, and so on. Moreover, at the initial stages of their operation in Africa and other regions of the world, religious organizations, as a rule, limited themselves to non-religious work in such fields as education, healthcare, transport infrastructure, economic activities of the missions, and anthropological research of local communities [Balyezin 2006; Bryndina 2024; Gorokhov 2011; Gorokhov, Dmitriev 2015]. This approach had two main results: firstly, it allowed missionaries to adapt to local conditions, as well as to secure the support of the indigenous population and authorities—primarily, traditional rulers, elders, and the colonial administration, who granted permission for the work of religious organizations and thus determined the conditions for competition between them. Secondly, it allowed religious organizations to secure an important role in the development of young African countries, compensating for the lack of funds and personnel in many socio-economic spheres, which was especially acute in the peripheral areas of the continent. As a result, in the context of interaction with religious actors, modern African states found themselves in a difficult position: having transferred a number of their social obligations to religious organizations, the authorities risk losing control over strategically important socio-economic spheres.

In this regard, the study of modern trends in the development of the state's confessional policy in African countries seems particularly relevant. The authors see their task in determining: 1) the most competitive religious organizations of the continent, 2) the main areas of non-religious activity of religious organizations, with a focus on social service; 3) the key instruments of the state's confessional policy in African countries, which can be used to reduce the risks associated with the increasing influence of religious organizations in the areas of the state's responsibility.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH MATERIALS

The theoretical core of this study is the theory of religious economy (or, the "religious market"), which grew out of the marketing paradigm in religious studies, within which

religious organizations are viewed as separate enterprises competing in the market of religions [Finke, Stark 2003: 101]. According to this theory, the fundamental principles of the functioning of the religious economy are in many ways similar to those of a market economy: competition stimulates religious organizations (the "suppliers") to expand the offer of their "religious product," adapting to the needs of consumers [Iannaccone 1997: 40].

Several religious organizations are usually involved in the competition process, and the population (religious "consumers") has the opportunity to choose between them. Therefore, to ensure the success of their missionary activity, religious organizations are offering the population not only a "religious product",—for example, in the form of consolation in the afterlife ("compensators"), but also earthly goods ("rewards") provided by them within the framework of their non-religious activity [Stark, Bainbridge 1987: 42]. As a result, the most competitive religious organizations, whose activities answer the aspirations of the largest possible number of the population, will grow due to the increasing number of followers and their growing share in the confessional space of the country.

It should be noted that the projection of economic relations onto such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon as religion, without doubt, presupposes a certain degree of reduction [Bruce 1993; Chaves 1995; Spickard 1998]. Nevertheless, in our opinion, this theory allows us to take a new look at the role of religion in society, as well as to reveal the mechanisms of competitive relations between religious organizations.

The competitiveness of a religious organization is most prominent in the phenomenon of conversion—the growth of the community due to the transition from other religious groups. Conversion manifests itself in the change of the religious affiliation of an individual as a result of complex, usually long-term interaction with a certain faith group. Although conversion may look like a spontaneous act, in reality, it is the result of the targeted activity of religious organizations within their missionary strategies. This kind of activity is especially characteristic of Christianity, primarily Protestantism and Catholicism, and of Islam. In contrast, in ethnic religions (the so-called traditional African religions[1]), missionary work is virtually non-existent, which limits their growth potential to only the natural reproduction of a certain ethnic group [Sharevskaya 1964] and makes them less resistant to conversion.

One of the most important features of modern missionary work of Christianity and Islam in Africa is that their religious organizations pay great attention to non-religious activities. Among the latter, special attention is paid to social service, which is important for increasing the attractiveness of a particular religion for the population. It is not surprising that most religious organizations operating in Africa implement development programs through subsidiary NGOs and congregations that are aimed at developing education, healthcare, and so on. Such a systematic approach allows them not only to attract new adherents but also to develop partnerships with government actors and international organizations, obtaining their financial and other kinds of support. This paper, therefore, pays special attention to social service, while other areas of non-religious activity, for example, commercial activity, banking [Fituni, Abramova 2018: 109–126], and politics are not covered in it.

[1] This term is used by the authors as a synonym for ethnic religions and does not include religious organizations such as African Independent Churches.

In the academic literature, the partnership between the state and religious organizations, as well as the role of the latter's non-religious activities in socio-economic development, became a subject of research relatively recently. It is noted that religious actors began to be systematically involved by international organizations and governmental institutions to implement joint projects from the beginning of the 21st century, although such cooperation was observed sporadically earlier.

The contribution of religious organizations to development is usually assessed positively, especially in the context of education [Engelhardt 2012; Wodon 2020; Wodon 2022a; Wodon 2022b], healthcare, and other areas of social service [Bompani 2015]. Sometimes religious organizations are viewed as agents or instruments of development [Black, Watson 2006], the management of which is possible through "religious engineering", understood [Spies, Schrode 2020] as a targeted transformation of religious traditions for the purpose of social and individual "improvements." A particular example of this approach is the promotion of environmental initiatives [Andreeva 2022].

However, religious organizations retain their subjectivity and even increase their socio-economic and political influence. As a result, their impact on society is more complex, and some religious organizations themselves can use state institutions to improve their competitiveness in the religious market. Nevertheless, only a few studies note certain risks of state-confessional cooperation [Wilkinson 2021; Voronina 2015].

The spatial dimension of the theory of the "religious market" was developed in the model of competitive development of confessional geospace [Gorohov 2020] and the model of transformation of confessional geospace [Zakharov 2020], which make it possible to assess the competitiveness of a particular religious organization. The higher the competitiveness of a religion, the faster it increases its "weight" in the confessional space of the studied territory. In this case, it is the very result of religious competition that is taken into account, ensured by all components of growth (conversion, demographic, and migration growth), regardless of their ratio [Balabeykina, Korobushchenko, Razumovsky 2024; Andreeva, Sledzevsky, Smirnov 2021]. At the same time, much attention is paid to the forms of religious relations determined by countries within the framework of their state-confessional policy through regulatory documents governing the activities of religious organizations [Gorohov 2020; Gorokhov, Dmitriev, Agafoshin 2022].

The study is based on denominational statistics for African countries from 1900 to 2015, provided by *the American Association of Religious Data Archives* (*ARDA*) [Brown, James, 2019a; Brown, James, 2019b]. These data formed the basis for forecasting the ratio of the largest denominations in African countries until 2025 using the exponential growth model[2]. To determine the largest religious organizations in Africa, additional sources were also analyzed, such as websites of religious organizations. Identification of the key areas of social service of religious organizations was made based on their analytical reports, official websites, and other sources. The assessment of government

[2] The model is based on the extrapolation of the average annual population growth rates for African countries and the average annual increase in the followers of ethnic religions, Islam, Christianity, and the largest branches of these world religions in 2010–2015, calculated by the authors of the paper. Despite a number of serious limitations, the application of the model in this case can be considered acceptable due to the high inertia of the structure of the confessional geospace of such scale and forecast timeframes.

strategies in interaction with religious organizations is focused mainly on the analysis of current constitutions, legal documents, analytical reports, and other sources. In addition, the authors used materials from a field study conducted by them in April–May 2024 in Ethiopia (Addis Ababa and the Southern Ethiopia region, South Omo zone).

TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONFESSIONAL SPACE IN MODERN AFRICA

Africa is one of the most interesting macro-regions of the world in terms of the scale and speed of transformations of the confessional space. It therefore seems important to examine the religious competition in a broad sense, that is, as expressed in the change in the ratio of the "weights" of various religions and their branches. The main trend observed in the development of the confessional space of Africa since the beginning of the 20th century has been the replacement of ethnic religions by Christianity and Islam, which has led to a fundamental change in the confessional structure of the population of Africa (*Table*). If, in 1910, every second African was an adherent of ethnic religions, then, in 1970, it was only every fifth one, and currently, only one in fifteen residents of Africa belongs to this spiritual tradition.

The share of Christians, on the contrary, increased throughout the period under review—from 11.4 to 49.6%. The share of followers of Islam, whose large-scale expansion in Africa began long before the 20th century, also increased significantly—from 35.6 to 40.1% in 1910–2025, but since the middle of the last century their share has decreased somewhat (see *Table* 1). A comparison of the average annual growth/decline rates of these confessions and of the population as a whole allows us to assert that in 1910–1970, the share of Christians and Muslims grew due to conversion from ethnic religions, but after 1970, the conversion growth of these religions, especially Islam, began to slow down.

Despite some decrease in the dynamics of the confessional space at the level of the largest religions, interreligious competition on the African continent remains extremely high in the 21st century. Moreover, if in the first half of the 20th century the main "rivals" of Christianity and Islam were ethnic religions, then, as the number of their adherents decreased, the conversion resource of the world religions was also depleting. As a result, the competition between Christianity and Islam in Africa intensified, which became especially noticeable in the contact zone of their geospaces. At present, the most acute rivalry between them is observed in countries with parity in the number of adherents of Christianity and Islam: in Nigeria, Ethiopia, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Eritrea (*Fig.*).

Another effect of the depletion of the conversion base of world religions in Africa has been the intensified competition between their branches. This is especially characteristic of Christianity, in which the intensification of intra-confessional competition is observed not only at the level of branches but also denominations. In the period under review, the most active expansion was characteristic of Protestantism and Catholicism, whose share in the population of Africa increased from 3.7% to 25.9% and from 2.8% to 18.1%, respectively. Eastern Christianity, which has a much longer history of presence in Africa, has practically not changed its share in the population of Africa: in 1910, it was 3.9%, in 2025, 4.0% (see *Table*).

Table. **Dynamics of the confessional structure of the population of Africa in 1910–2025, %**

Religion	1910	1970	2015	2025*
Ethnic religions	51.7	20.1	7.2	6.3
Christianity	11.4	34.7	48.0	49.6
Eastern Christianity	3.9	4.8	4.4	4.0
Catholicism	2.8	12.6	17.0	18.1
Protestantism	3.7	13.1	24.3	25.9
Pentecostals	0,0	2.7	7.5	8.2
Reformers	1.8	2.6	1.8	1.4
Anglicans	0.7	2,3	4.7	4.7
Islam	35.6	42.3	41.1	40.1
Sunnism	35.6	42.0	38.3	36.6
Shiism	0,1	0,1	2.0	2.7
Ahmadiyya	0,0	0.3	0.8	1.0

Calculated and compiled by the authors based on: [Brown, James, 2019b].

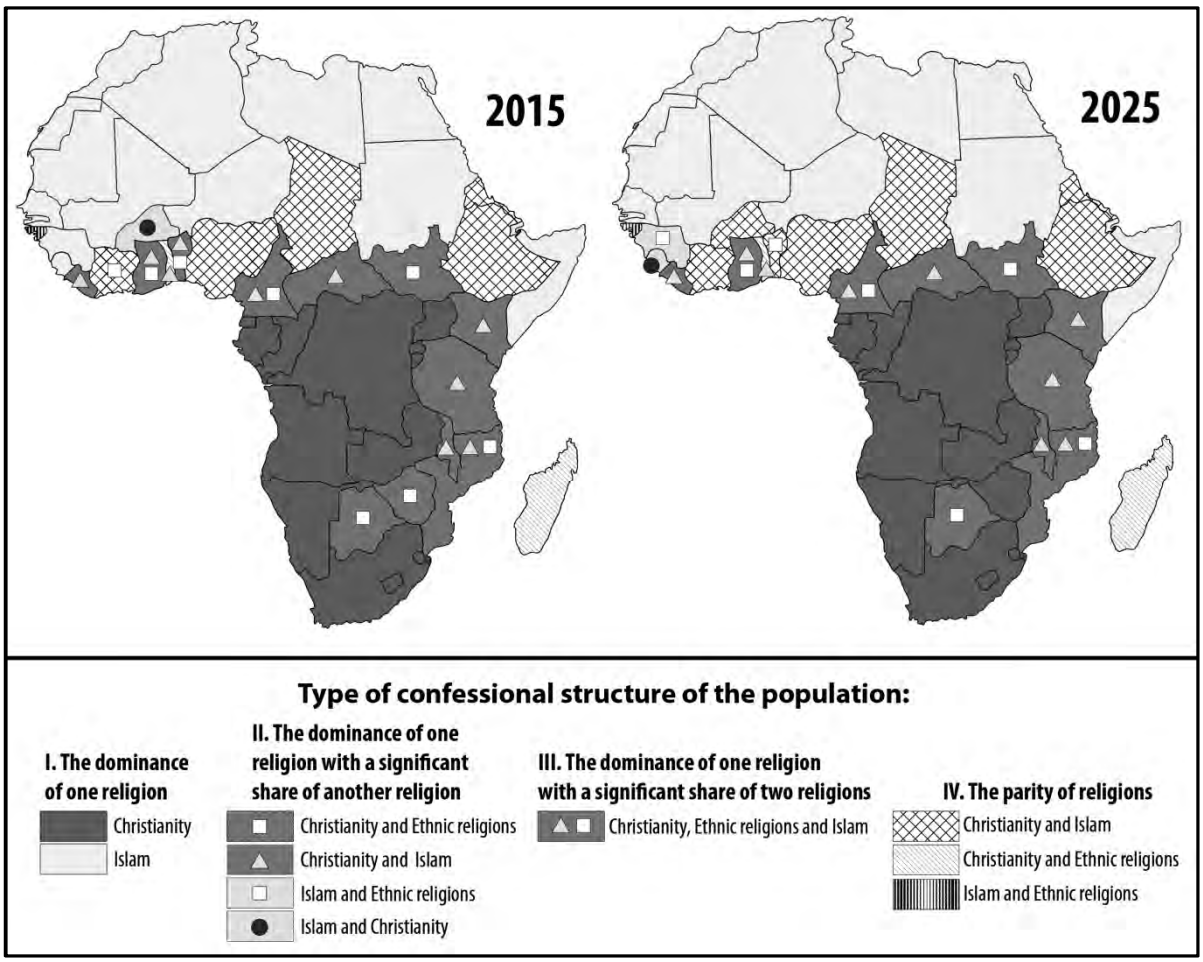

Figure. **Dynamics of types of religious structure of the population of African countries, 2015–2025 (forecast).**

Calculated and compiled by the authors based on: [Brown, James 2019a]

As a result, the ratio of the main Christian branches has also changed. In 1910, their shares were approximately equal: Protestants made up 32.1% of the Christian population of Africa, Catholics—24.3%, followers of Eastern Christianity—34.1%. In 2025, the leading position was taken by Protestantism, the share of followers of which reached 52.1%; Catholics made up 36.5% of Christians on the continent; and adherents of Eastern Christian churches, who have significantly lost their positions on the continent, 8.0%.

Comparison of the average annual growth rates of Christianity as a whole and its individual branches allows us to assess the competitiveness of denominations whose growth is largely ensured by conversion. Among the denominations that continue to grow actively due to conversion are Lutheranism, with its annual conversion growth rate of 1.26% in 2010–2015, Baptism (1.09%), Pentecostalism[3] (0.95%), Catholicism (0.67%), Protestantism (0.64%).

In some cases, there was a conversion loss of followers due to the transition to other Christian denominations; for example, this is typical for the Reformed Churches, for which this indicator was -2.6 during the same period; Methodism and Eastern Christianity (both -1.5%); and Anglicanism (-0.32%). Nevertheless, both Anglicanism and Eastern Christianity retain their significance in certain African countries. In the case of Eastern Christianity, the indicated negative trend can be changed by the intensification of missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church, which created its exarchate in Africa on December 29, 2021.

An important indicator in assessing the competitiveness of a religion is the dynamics of the contribution of conversion [4] to the change in the number of followers. A comparison of this indicator for 1970–2010 and 2010–2015 demonstrates a decrease in the importance of conversion for the growth of the largest Christian branches in Africa. In particular, for Pentecostalism, in which its apologists continue to see the future of Christianity [Anderson 2018; Wariboko, Oliverio 2020], the contribution of conversion has significantly decreased: if in 1970–2010, it provided for 48.6% of the overall growth in the number of Pentecostals, in 2010–2015, it was only 27.8%. For Protestantism as a whole, this indicator for the same periods was 36.7 and 20.5%; for Baptism, 44.3 and 30.5%. At the same time, positive dynamics of this indicator were observed only in the case of Lutheranism and Catholicism; the contribution of conversion for these branches of Christianity increased slightly from 33.4% and 20.5% in 1970–2010 to 33.7% and 21.3% in 2010–2015.

Due to the smaller diversity of branches, religious competition between the various denominations of Islam is less intense. Throughout the period under review, Sunnism remained the largest branch of Islam, but its share in the population of Africa has recently begun to decline: in 1970, it was 42.3%, and in 2025, 40.1%. At the same time, the decrease in the share of Sunnism was accompanied by a fairly active growth of Shiism and Ahmadiyya. The respective shares of their adherents in the Muslim population of Africa increased from 0.2% and 0.0% in 1910 to 6.8% and 2.6% in 2025, with the main

[3] The authors include in this denomination not only followers of classical Pentecostal churches of the first wave but also representatives of charismatic and neo-Pentecostal churches of the second and third waves. For more details, see [Zakharov 2023].

[4] In this case, it is understood as the ratio of the average annual conversion growth to the average annual growth of the corresponding denomination.

source of their growth being conversion, which in 2010–2015 provided 58.7% of the growth in the number of Shiites and 48.0% of Ahmadiyya followers.

Such rapid transformations of the African confessional space determine a number of its features, manifested, among other things, in the form of "syncretism": the emergence of Afro-Christianity, Afro-Islam, Christlam, etc. This controversial phenomenon remains beyond the scope of this study, due to the difficulties of obtaining the relevant statistics and to the fact that the actual existence of some "standard" forms of world religions remains debatable [Zakharov 2020: 25–27]. At the same time, ethnic religions retain their positions, especially in peripheral rural regions, which must be taken into account when analyzing at a lower territorial level.

From the standpoint of the institutional approach, most of the examined Christian and Islamic denominations are divided into separate religious organizations. Many of them do not have official legal status, which naturally limits the scope of their social mission and the possibilities for implementing non-religious activities in general.

Among the most significant religious organizations in Africa, based on their demographic weight, the following can be named: the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), which unites more than 200 million people across the continent; the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), which has more than 40 million people; the Anglican Church of Nigeria (18 million people); the Ethiopian Kale Heiwot Church and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Jesus (11 million each); the *Ahmadiyya* Muslim community (almost 10 million people); Nigerian Pentecostal *The Church of the Lord Worldwide*, formerly *The Church of the Lord, Aladura* (8.8 million), and so on.

MAIN DIRECTIONS OF SOCIAL SERVICE OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Almost all modern religious organizations in Africa are engaged in non-religious activities in one way or another, consisting primarily of social service. It allows not only to better understand the needs of the community but also to attract new adherents, many of whom come to the corresponding religion through social projects. This section attempts to assess the scale of the most significant areas of social mission, without claiming a comprehensive analysis.

Education traditionally is one of the key areas of work of religious organizations. It was largely thanks to them that the education systems of many African countries were laid down [Gribanova 2012], and the full functioning and expansion of those is still largely determined by churches. This is evidenced by the fact that about 20% of all educational institutions on the continent are subordinate to religious organizations [Wodon 2022a: 74–76], and, taking into account non-profit organizations, some of which are also affiliated with church structures, this figure may be even higher.

The largest donor among African religious organizations in this area is the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) [Wodon 2020; Wodon 2022a], which in many countries of the continent implements its social mission through affiliated NGOs[5]. In 2022, this organization ensured the functioning of 82.3 thousand educational institutions throughout Africa, attended by more than 30.6 million people. The statistics provided by the RCC for

[5] The most famous of these are *Catholic Relief, SCORE, Comunità di Sant'Egidio,* etc.

2022, broken down by levels of education, indicate that the church pays greatest attention to the development of primary, as well as pre-school and secondary education: it maintains 44.4 thousand primary schools, attended by almost 20.6 million students, and 20.6 thousand kindergartens, covering 2.8 million people. Almost 6.8 million people study in its 17.2 thousand secondary schools, and more than 181 thousand upper secondary school students also attend Catholic educational institutions[6]. For comparison, according to calculations for 33 countries in sub-Saharan Africa[7], the total number of primary school students in 2020 should have been 161 million, and secondary school students—about 37.2 million [Mingat, Ledoux, Rakotomalala 2010: 22, 77].

In some countries, Catholic education occupies a significant place. For example, in 2017, the number of students in RCC schools in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was 6,219 thousand (30% of the total number of students in the country), in Kenya—4,156 thousand (25%), in Malawi—2,161 thousand (40%), in Rwanda—1,763 thousand (40%), in Zambia—633 thousand (15%), in Gabon—310 thousand (60%), and so on [Wodon 2020: 9]. In addition, in 2023, the RCC provided the opportunity to obtain higher education to more than 283 thousand Africans[8]. In addition, the reports of the RCC educational programs note their high attractiveness for the population, as well as the active growth of both the number of educational institutions at all levels and the number of students. Thus, the RCC is one of the key partners for the governments of the continent in the development of education, and in some countries, it has actually monopolized certain educational niches, which is especially characteristic of peripheral areas.

Protestant organizations also play a significant role in the development of education in Africa [Engelhardt 2012: 311–372], but there are no comprehensive reports on this in the public domain, making it difficult to determine its scale. Some studies have shown that Protestant organizations own a significant share of schools in a number of countries on the continent. In 2017, they managed 34.4% of primary and secondary schools in the DRC, ahead of even the Catholic Church, which owned 21.7% of schools, and the state (18.9%); in Rwanda, they owned 20.4% of schools, while the Catholics owned 38.9% and the state owned 27.5% [Scheunpflug et al. 2021]. However, the lack of a centralized structure somewhat limits the influence of Protestant churches on state institutions, reduces their ability to attract financial resources, and may negatively affect the quality of education.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) has historically played an important role in Ethiopia's education and culture, but unfortunately, it also does not publicly report on its programs in this field. The last estimates we found were from 1970. According to those, the church's reading schools (*Nebab Bet*) cover 15 thousand people.[9] Such schools retain their importance, and their attendance at present, according to our observations, may be

[6] Le statistiche della Chiesa cattolica 2024. *Fides.* 20.10.2024. https://www.fides.org/it/attachments/view/file/Dossier_Statistiche_2024.pdf (accessed: 01.11.2024)

[7] The following Sub-Saharan Africa's countries were left out of the study: Somalia, Djibouti, Liberia, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Angola, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Eswatini, Mozambique.

[8] Le statistiche della Chiesa cattolica 2024. *Fides.* 10.20.2024. https://www.fides.org/it/attachments/view/file/Dossier_Statistiche_2024.pdf (accessed: 11.01.2024)

[9] Haile Gebriel Dagne. *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church School System.* https://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/ethiopian/school.html (accessed: 11.01.2024)

an order of magnitude higher. And although the EOC hardly aims to give students a complete education in the secular sense, it nevertheless ensures their basic literacy.

A situation similar to that of the EOC is typical for educational institutions in Muslim organizations in Africa, but their activities are much larger in scale, thanks to a wide network of Quranic schools and madrasas. Such schools focus on the study of Islamic traditions and culture (sometimes only in the form of memorizing the Quran) but also instill basic literacy. At the same time, as the example of Senegal demonstrates, the network of madrasas (*daaras*) can be integrated into the official state education system, in particular by introducing classes in mathematics and foreign languages[10]. The share of informal Quranic schools in the educational system, according to some estimates, reaches 33.5% in Somalia, 3.5% in Nigeria, 6.8% in Chad, 15.4% in Comoros, 23.1% in Mauritania, 10.9% in the Gambia, up to 5% in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal [Wodon 2022b: 74–76]. At the same time, in some African countries, a significant proportion of parents prefer Quranic schools to formal education, which means that the demand for religious education cannot be explained solely by the lack of a secular alternative.

Healthcare is another priority of the non-religious activities of religious organizations. In this area, special attention is paid, firstly, to combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, the consequences of natural disasters and armed conflicts, and secondly, to building hospitals and providing them with medicines, equipment, and personnel. The effectiveness and systemic nature of religious organizations in these areas is determined by the extensive network of religious facilities (parishes, mosques, missionary stations), penetrating even the most remote areas, as well as their rich experience of social mission and optimization of resources. This is also facilitated by the integration trend in the work of religious organizations in the field of healthcare: they launch joint projects aimed at creating a unified system of medical institutions and providing legal and informational support for their activities; for example, *The Africa Christian Health Associations Platform* (established in 2007).

Information on the contribution of religious organizations to the development of the healthcare system in African countries is fragmented. Only the RCC publishes fairly complete statistics. In 2022, it owned almost 14 thousand medical institutions, including more than 5 thousand medical dispensaries, 1.6 thousand hospitals, 205 leprosariums, over 660 homes for the elderly and disabled, 1.1 thousand orphanages, 2.2 thousand nurseries, 1.5 thousand marital counseling centers, as well as almost 1.2 thousand other healthcare and social support institutions[11]. In some countries, the role of the RCC is particularly noticeable, for example, in the DRC, it owns 2,218 medical institutions (including 419 hospitals, 1,773 health centers), in Kenya —570 (95 and 454), in Nigeria—502 (287 and 200), in Tanzania—489 (68 and 414), in Uganda—322 (33 and 288), in Madagascar—278 (26 and 221) [Wodon 2022b: 117–118].

[10] Kattan R.B., Pétraud J.P., Lo M.M. Using Koranic Schools to Improve Education for Boys and Girls. *World Bank Group.* 04.19.2017. https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/sief-trust-fund/brief/using-koranic-schools-to-improve-education-for-boys-and-girls (accessed: 11.01.2024)

[11] *Le statistiche della Chiesa cattolica 2024*. https://www.fides.org/it/attachments/view/file/Dossier_Statistiche_2024.pdf (accessed: 11.01.2024)

As a result, a quarter of all healthcare in sub-Saharan Africa is provided by the RCC alone, and given the initiatives of other religious organizations, their overall share should be significantly higher.

In addition to the development of healthcare based on the principles of evidence-based medicine, a number of religious organizations, especially those influenced by Pentecostalism, practice "miracles of healing." The experience of one of the largest Protestant churches in Ethiopia shows that it is precisely "miracles" that allows to secure the loyalty of the local population and achieve the first successes on the frontiers of Christianization. However, successful treatment in hospitals also produces a similar effect.

Charity, consisting of providing gratuitous assistance to those in need in kind and in cash, social investment, organizing public events[12], etc., is another important area of non-religious activity of religious organizations, which allows them to simultaneously increase the number of their followers and compensate for the lack of capacity of African states to fulfill their social obligations.

The authority of religious organizations allows them to attract funding from mother churches, international organizations, states, and private philanthropists to various development funds, which they manage through NGOs or directly. For certain countries, this source of funding is of exceptional importance, for example, for the DRC[13].

Of no less importance for the implementation of certain projects, for example, to combat epidemics, hunger, or natural disasters, are individual large donations. Various forms of charity and options for supporting fellow believers in need are embedded in Islam and other religions. Of great importance is the involvement of volunteers working in institutions established at religious organizations or providing other assistance.

Particular attention is paid to working with orphans. For example, in 2019, the RCC owned 1,646 orphanages in Africa, including 675 in Kenya, 146 in the DRC, 82 in Tanzania [Wodon 2022b: 117–118]. Protestant and Muslim organizations also run orphanages, but there are no statistical data on their numbers in Africa. At the local level, charity and social support from religious organizations help ordinary believers cope with difficult life situations, start businesses, and so on.

Faith diplomacy, which consists of peacekeeping and the resolution of armed conflicts, although it does not play a significant role in attracting new followers, nevertheless, allows religious organizations to influence state actors in Africa and also to increase their moral authority in society.

As practice shows, the tools used by religious organizations are sometimes more effective than traditional diplomatic practices, which can be explained by the authority of religious leaders. For example, the direct participation of Pope Francis contributed to the final end of the civil war in South Sudan (2013–2020)[14]. No less active is the Catholic

[12] The above-mentioned areas of social mission should also most often be attributed to charity, but due to their scale, we have singled them out separately.

[13] *Catholic Relief Services in Democratic Republic of Congo.* https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/where-we-work/democratic-republic-congo (accessed: 01.11.2024)

[14] Shaban A.R.A. Pope kissing our feet, a blessing or curse... - South Sudan president. *Africa news.* 14.05.2019. https://www.africanews.com/2019/05/14/pope-kissing-our-feet-will-be-a-blessing-or-curse-if-south-sudan-president/ (accessed: 01.11.2024)

organization, Comunità di Sant'Egidio, which contributed to the end of the civil war in Mozambique (1976–1992).

These examples are far from exceptional. The Holy See demonstrates its determination to use all its resources to maintain peace on the "continent of hope" [Gorokhov, Dmitriev, Zakharov 2022]. Together with other Christian and Muslim organizations, the RCC actively participates in peacekeeping initiatives, contributing to the maintenance of peace and overcoming conflicts in many countries of the continent[15]. Recently, thanks to the activation of interfaith organizations, for example, the African Council of Religious Leaders (established in 2010), faith diplomacy is increasingly gaining international significance for resolving bloody conflicts and overcoming their consequences, such as migration crises [Gorokhov, Agafoshin, Dmitriev 2023].

Religious organizations also play an important role in reconciling conflicting parties at the level of individual states and their regions. African countries involve religious leaders in interfaith councils designed to ensure dialogue between conflicting parties at the national and regional levels; and, as the experience of Ethiopia shows, the powers and responsibilities of such councils can be significantly expanded.

The institutionalization of this area of social mission is initiated not only by states; similar steps to create a normative basis for faith diplomacy are also taken by religious organizations themselves. In particular, in 2002, at the African Interfaith Summit in South Africa, the Declaration on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace in Africa was adopted, which was joined by religious organizations belonging to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and other faiths. In addition to conflict resolution, the document outlines broader objectives: "Utilizing our religious authority to insist that our political leaders take the path of peace rather than the path of war, and *to hold them accountable for their promises and their actions* (italics added) by actively engaging all political leaders in dialogue with regard to positive initiatives and efforts towards conflict resolution, the promotion of peace and justice, and *sustaining democratic institutions…*"[16]

INSTRUMENTS OF THE CONFESSIONAL POLICY OF AFRICAN STATES

As shown above, religious organizations occupy an important, and in some countries, a key place in providing the population with socially significant services and take on part of the obligations of state institutions. As a result, these organizations have become active participants in socio-economic and political processes in African countries, having the ability to influence official authorities and receiving competitive advantages from them in the "religious market."

At the same time, the largest religious organizations constitute a real alternative to state institutions. Given that a significant portion of religious actors emerged outside of Africa, the current situation creates certain risks for the states of the continent. This point

[15]Security – Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. *Vatican*. https://humandevelopment.va/en/sviluppo-umano-integrale/sicurezza.html (accessed: 20.01.2024); *War in South Sudan.* https://caritas.org/what-we-do/conflicts-and-disasters/south-sudan/ (accessed: 20.01.2024)

[16] IFAPA History – Embracing the Gift of Peace (part 3). *IFAPA*. 30.10.2015. https://africa-faithforpeace.org (accessed: 01.11.2024)

of view is confirmed by the responses of our respondents in Ethiopia, some of whom noted that international aid donors themselves determine the content of projects and the territories where they will be implemented. Moreover, as shown in [Demese 2017: 173–179], some NGOs demand political changes in exchange for financial assistance—in most cases, the implementation of certain political reforms in the spirit of Western-style liberal democracy.

In addition, religious actors can be used as instruments in political struggle, to legitimize their power in the eyes of the public, by individual leaders, for example, R. Mugabe (Zimbabwe), D. Rawlings (Ghana), D. Moi (Kenya), and others, who attracted Pentecostal churches to their side. However, the RCC and some Protestant churches openly condemned such practices, pointing to the "inefficiency" of the state system in many African countries[17].

Another challenge for the state is the growing competition between religious organizations, which can lead to a deterioration in interfaith relations and even to armed conflicts. Against the backdrop of the politicization of religion, the activities of individual religious organizations can gravitate towards destructiveness, manifesting in the formation of terrorist groups [Ponomarev 2020] and the organization of protest movements [Ponomarev, Ulanova 2023]. In addition, recently in Africa, more and more private "business churches" have emerged, whose leaders abuse the people's trust for their own personal gain.

The challenges outlined require African states to develop policy solutions designed to maximize the positive aspects of cooperation with religious organizations. The results of the analysis indicate the existence of a wide range of tools that can be used by African countries to achieve this goal.

The foundation of the normative framework of a state's confessional policy in African countries is the constitution, the provisions of which describe, among other things, the spectrum and fullness of religious freedoms included in the number of general rights and freedoms. In general, African states express their commitment to international norms in this area and support the rights of believers and religious organizations.

However, many African countries allow for their restriction due to the need to maintain public order and national security. For example, the 1977 Constitution of Tanzania (as amended in 2005) includes all basic religious freedoms but regulates them quite strictly. For example, Article 30.2 allows for the restriction of the relevant rights by the practice of adopting laws designed to ensure "defense, public safety, public order, public morality, public health <…> for the purposes of enhancing public benefit."[18]

Such restrictions are quite common. In the 2001 Senegalese constitution (as amended in 2016), all rights and freedoms are guaranteed under reserve of the public order (Article 24)[19]. In the 2010 Constitution of Niger (as amended in 2017), a similar wording is supplemented by the requirement to maintain "social peace and national unity" (Article

[17] Spirit and Power: a 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals. *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*. 05.10.2006. https://www.pewforum.org/2006/10/05/spirit-and-power/ (accessed: 01.11.2024)

[18] Tanzania (United Republic of)'s Constitution of 1977 with Amendments through 2005. *Constitute Project*. https://constituteproject.org/constitution/Tanzania_2005.pdf (accessed: 20.01.2025)

[19] Senegal's Constitution of 2001 with Amendments through 2016. *Constitute Project*. https://constituteproject.org/constitution/Senegal_2016.pdf (accessed: 20.01.2025)

30)[20]. In the 1992 Constitution of Togo (as amended in 2007), the provisions in question "may be subject to the restrictions expressly provided by the law and necessary for the protection of the national security, of the public order, of the public health, of morality or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others" (Article 14)[21]. The 2005 Constitution of the DRC (as amended in 2011) states that freedom of religion must be exercised by citizens "under reserve of respect for the law, for public order, for morality and for the rights of others" (Article 22)[22]. The 2019 Sudanese constitution states that religious freedoms must be practiced "in accordance with the requirements of the law and public order" (Article 56)[23]. The same article also states: "No one shall be compelled to convert to a religion they do not believe in or to practice rites or rituals they do not voluntarily accept"[24], which, as shown in [Vyver 1999], given the ambiguity of the wording, could be used to restrict missionary activity.

Similar wording can be found in the constitutions of other African countries. For example, under the 1968 Constitution of Mauritius (as amended in 2016), missionary activity can also be limited in accordance with Article 11, paragraph 5, which prohibits forced conversion to any religion, and also limits religious freedoms to the "interests of defense, public safety, public order, public morality or public health."[25] In their mildest form, similar reservations are present in the 1996 Constitution of South Africa (as amended in 2012): "The rights in the Bill of Rights may be limited only in terms of law of general application to the extent that the limitation is reasonable and justifiable in an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom…" (Article 36)[26]. Thus, the constitutions of most African countries contain provisions that *can be* used to justify the introduction of restrictions on the activities of religious organizations, the status of which can change at any time.

The constitutions of predominantly Muslim African countries often enshrine the special status of Islam and limit the possibility of foreign religious organizations to participate in the competition process. In such countries, the non-Muslim, and often non-Sunni (Shiite, Ahmadiyya, and other) organizations can be subjected to bans on missionary activity among Muslims, restrictions on marriage with Muslims, strict control over the operation of religious organizations and their financing, censorship of religious literature, restrictions on its import and distribution, and presence in the media.

It should be noted that the most large-scale restrictions on the activities of religious organizations began to be devised in the 2000s, when North African countries faced a

[20] Niger's Constitution of 2010 with Amendments through 2017. Constitute Project. https://constituteproject.org/constitution/Niger_2017.pdf (accessed: 20.01.2025)
[21] Togo's Constitution of 1992 with Amendments through 2007. Constitute Project. https://constituteproject.org/constitution/Togo_2007.pdf (accessed: 20.01.2025)
[22] Congo (Democratic Republic of the)'s Constitution of 2005 with Amendments through 2011. *Constitute Project.* https://constituteproject.org/constitution/Democratic_Republic_of_the_Congo_2011.pdf (accessed: 20.01.2025)
[23] Sudan's Constitution of 2019. *Constitute Project*. https://constituteproject.org/constitution/Sudan_2019.pdf (accessed: 20.01.2025)
[24] Ibid.
[25] Mauritius's Constitution of 1968 with Amendments through 2016. *Constitute Project*. https://constituteproject.org/constitution/Mauritius_2016.pdf (accessed: 20.01.2025)
[26] South Africa's Constitution of 1996 with Amendments through 2012. *Constitute Project*. https://constitute project.org/constitution/South_Africa_2012.pdf (accessed: 20.01.2025)

wave of terrorist attacks. As shown by Russian Africanist N.A. Zherlitsina using the example of Morocco, this policy was aimed at limiting the influence of Muslim opposition and Salafist organizations [Zherlitsina 2021], but a similar protectionist approach aimed at protecting traditional Islam can be called typical for many Muslim countries in Africa and other regions of the world.

In some African countries, the rights of the religious organizations are not protected because they are not recognized by the state. Such organizations are sometimes able to operate fairly freely, such as Muslim organizations in Angola, but more often the state imposes sanctions against them. In some cases, such as Gabon, unregistered organizations face a relatively large fine of 36,000 to 720,000 CFA francs, which is doubled for repeated violations[27]. In other cases, they are subject to greater pressure—their members may be imprisoned. This is the case in Eritrea, for example, where the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, and Islam have official status.[28] However, even these organizations are forced to operate in the country with extreme caution. As of 2020, a ban on the activities of one or more religious organizations was in effect in 12 African countries and territories: Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Western Sahara, Cameroon, Mauritania, Morocco, Nigeria, Tanzania, the Central African Republic, Chad, and Eritrea [Majumdar, Villa 2021].

Political regulation of the religious market is implemented by state institutions, including special departments of the ministries of internal affairs or ministries of religious affairs. An important instrument of their activity is the bureaucratization of the work of religious organizations, which manifests itself, first of all, in the complication of the process of their official registration and in introducing higher requirements for the services they provide.

The introduction of such restrictions is justified by the activation of terrorist organizations and the spread of criminal schemes used by unscrupulous “pastors,” as well as the low quality of religious and social infrastructure. In particular, in Rwanda in 2018, the law on religious organizations was revised[29], the main effect of which was their mandatory re-registration. The country established “construction” standards for religious buildings and introduced qualification requirements for the leaders of religious organizations—priests and official representatives. Such a serious revision of the requirements for religious organizations led to their mass closure[30].

However, the registration procedure for religious organizations in African countries is not always transparent, so some of them actually do not have the opportunity to apply for official recognition and sometimes even to extend their existing official status—this

[27] Loi № 35/62 du 10 décembre 1962 relative aux associations. P. 67. *Hebdo Informations*. 11.05.1991. https://clientearth.fr/media/ud2pbmtp/1962-12-10-loi-n-35-62-du-10-decembre-1962-relative-aux-associations-gabon-ext-fr.pdf (accessed: 23.12.2024)

[28] A Proclamation to Define and Regulate the Activities of Religions and religious organisations 73/1995. *Gazette of Eritrean Laws: Proclamations and Legal Notices*. July 15, 1995. https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.law/lleritrea.eritrean-proc-73-1995 (accessed: 27.12.2024); Eritrea. *2023 Report on International Religious Freedom*. https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/eritrea/ (accessed: 27.12.2024)

[29] Law № 72/2018. Determining the Organisation and Functioning of Faith-Based Organisations. *Official Gazette*. 2018. № 37. P. 46–84. https://rwandalii.org/akn/rw/act/law/2018/72/eng@2018-09-10 (accessed: 01.11.2024)

[30] Rwanda 2018 International Religious Freedom Report. *US State Department*. May 2019. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/RWANDA-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf (accessed: 23.12.2024)

practice is common in North African countries, especially in Algeria and Egypt. Our field study, mentioned above, also identified some of the problems that new religious organizations in Ethiopia are experiencing. Their registration is complicated by multiple obstacles: it can be performed only in the capital of the country and requires the constant presence of a representative to resolve operational issues, prepare a package of documents, and pay fees. Difficulties in obtaining land for the construction of religious buildings and cemeteries were also noted. At the same time, there are religious organizations in Ethiopia for which regular re-registration is not mandatory. These are mainly large denominations with a long history of presence in this country. A similar situation is typical for Uganda, where there is an official list of "traditional religions" that enjoy the support of the authorities.

Religious organizations also encounter great difficulties when attempting to open educational institutions, for which African states impose exacting requirements. In Ethiopia, the interviewed religious leaders explained this by the difficulty of bringing the educational program into line with federal standards, as well as the lack of personnel and funds for maintaining the school. A similar situation is typical for other African countries, for example, for Namibia. K. Engelhardt provides the following quote: "To get a private school qualified one must either have a very good contact, lots of money or meet a need that no one else is attending … it is difficult to start new school because of the stringent rules" [Engelhardt 2012: 353].

Moreover, educational institutions under religious organizations may be removed from their control and integrated into the state educational system. For example, such a situation occurred in Malawi after the 1994 elections, which caused discontent among religious leaders and communities in the country [Miller-Grandvaux, Welmond, Wolf 2002]. Religious organizations encounter similar problems when launching other projects within the framework of their non-religious activities, including mass media.

African states also have the ability to oversee the non-religious activities of religious organizations through the legislative requirement for regular reports to the state on the sources and volumes of their funding, as well as the breakdown of their expenditure.

Authorities have the ability to temporarily suspend the work of religious organizations during a worsening epidemiological situation. For example, such restrictive measures were introduced in a number of African countries due to the spread of *COVID-19*. In individual cases, according to some researchers, the pandemic has become a pretext for increasing persecution of religious minorities; human rights activists have drawn attention to cases of confiscation of real estate and land plots, restriction of access to medical care for members of certain communities, violence, and even murder[31].

In addition to restrictive instruments, African states, taking into account the high level of religiosity of their citizens, are trying to build partnerships with religious organizations. For example, they are becoming increasingly involved in interfaith councils to work jointly towards the national development goals and to implement and popularize reforms. For example, religious organizations, due to their high authority and

[31] Loft R., Robinson T., Gill J. Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious and ethnic minority communities throughout the world. Commons Library Debate Pack. *UK House of Commons*. 2021. https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2021-0093/CDP-2021-0093.pdf (accessed: 01.11.2025)

support from the country's population, are actively involved by the Ethiopian government in the implementation of social and infrastructure projects [Zakharov 2024].

At the same time, the identification of unfair practices performed under the guise of religious organizations is carried out by the state, relying on the extensive social networks inherent in traditional societies, as well as dialogue with authoritative religious organizations.

CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

The decline in the conversion base of Christianity and Islam in Africa has led to increased competition between their branches. An important indicator of the competitiveness of a confession is its non-religious activity, one of the main areas of which in African countries is social service—education and healthcare, as well as charity and faith diplomacy—these being the areas with the highest potential for attracting new followers.

Religious actors control approximately a quarter of the education and healthcare systems in African countries as a whole, although in some countries this figure may be significantly higher. The largest "provider" in these areas is the Catholic Church and its affiliated organizations, which supply about half of the services provided by all religious organizations on the continent. Such a high activity in the social and other spheres, which began during the pontificate of Pope Paul VI (1963–1978) [Gorokhov, Dmitriev, Zakharov 2022], has already found its quantitative expression in confessional statistics.

Profuse non-religious activities have allowed religious organizations to become important socio-economic and political actors in African countries, with the ability to influence states and thereby set the parameters for the functioning of the entire "religious market." Moreover, due to the high religiosity of the population, religious organizations in some cases can be perceived by citizens of African countries as a desirable alternative to state institutions. This dimension of religious competition in some cases manifests itself in attempts at "official" integration of religious actors and state structures[32]. For example, in Zambia, which has been considered a "Christian state" since 1996; in Sudan, which was governed by Sharia law from 1983 to 2020, etc.

The growing influence of religious organizations also carries certain risks for African states. The most serious of them, in our opinion, are: firstly, the instrumentalization of the socio-political influence of religious organizations by foreign actors; secondly, the involvement of religious actors in electoral and political processes, manifested in the use of their mobilization potential by opposition forces or authoritarian regimes; thirdly, the radicalization of some religious organizations, leading to their activities turning destructive; fourthly, the expansion of "business churches" used by unscrupulous "pastors" for personal enrichment, etc.

The identified challenges are reflected in the confessional policy of African states, which is designed to maximize the positive aspects of cooperation with religious

[32]An important direction for further research is the study of other forms of integration, which to one degree or another are characteristic of almost all African states.

organizations, while simultaneously reducing the potential risks of this interaction and ensuring the state's complete control over the operation of the "religious market."

The authors identified a wide range of tools that can be used by government actors to achieve this objective:

1) adoption of amendments to the articles of the constitution that ensure religious freedoms, allowing for restrictions on the work of religious organizations that pose a threat to public security and national interests;

2) tightening the requirements concerning the non-religious activities of religious organizations, especially in the field of education; introducing construction, sanitary, and other standards for the objects of the corresponding infrastructure;

3) introducing qualification requirements for personnel of religious organizations;

4) enshrining in the country's legislation the mandatory registration of religious organizations in accordance with national standards in order to limit the growth of private "business churches";

5) ensuring temporary suspension of the work of religious organizations during epidemic outbreaks;

6) limiting the presence of religious organizations in the information field, for example, by regulating the procedure for registering their media outlets, the use of religious symbols, etc.;

7) allowing or sanctioning the use of restrictive instruments in relation to certain confessions;

8) institutionalizing the partnership with religious organizations as "development agents" by establishing a special body, for example, an interfaith council, or within the framework of a national development strategy, agreements, memoranda, etc.;

9) using public scrutiny to identify unscrupulous "religious leaders" and religious practices that contradict the country's laws or the relevant religious doctrine.

However, the inconsistent use of these instruments, including under the influence of individual religious organizations and foreign policy actors, carries socio-economic and political risks. In solving this problem, it is of fundamental importance to stimulate dialogue between state and religious actors, for example, through interfaith councils. We see the main task of such dialogue in coordinating the principles of regulating the activities of religious organizations and their relations with state institutions within specific areas of cooperation, in order to exclude adverse consequences of religious competition and foreign actors' interference.

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Научная статья

СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ МИССИЯ РЕЛИГИОЗНЫХ ОРГАНИЗАЦИЙ В АФРИКЕ: НОВЫЕ ВЫЗОВЫ И ВОЗМОЖНЫЕ ОГРАНИЧЕНИЯ

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Аннотация. Рассматривается проблема государственного контроля за внекультовой деятельностью религиозных акторов в Африке, благодаря которой некоторые из них стали играть важную роль в социально-экономической жизни стран континента, порой становясь реальной альтернативой государственным институтам. Эти процессы анализируются авторами с позиций теории религиозной экономики (рынка религий), которая определяет конкурентоспособность той или иной религиозной организации ее возможностью привлекать новых последователей. Измеримым показателем конкурентоспособности на рынке религий может служить увеличение доли ее приверженцев на той или иной территории.

Для определения современных тенденций развития конфессионального пространства Африки авторами используется модель экспоненциального роста, с помощью которой был получен прогноз соотношения крупнейших религий и их течений в государствах континента на 2025 г. Показано, что следствием сокращения конверсионной базы христианства и ислама за счет уменьшения численности адептов этнорелигий стало усиление конкуренции между их направлениями. Исходя из размеров, темпов конверсионного прироста и особенностей организации внекультовой деятельности установлен высокий уровень конкурентоспособности в Африке Римско-католической церкви (РКЦ), которая отличается наибольшим масштабом проектов развития в рамках ее социальной миссии.

Обращается внимание на риски усиливающегося влияния религиозных организаций, связанные с использованием некоторых из них как инструментов внешнего влияния, а также возможностями их политизации, радикализации и так далее. Определен набор инструментов контроля государства за деятельностью религиозных организаций, позволяющих максимизировать их положительную роль в развитии стран Африки, и минимизировать потенциальные риски такого сотрудничества.

Ключевые слова: религиозная конкуренция, конфессиональное пространство, Африка, внекультовая деятельность, социальная миссия, государственно-конфессиональная политика, христианство, ислам

Конфликт интересов: авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Персональный вклад авторов: совместное исследование.

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