



How Does Religion Affect Development?

Digital Development Dialogue (3D)
25.06.2026 Seminar Summary

This seminar explored how religion shapes development processes and outcomes, bringing together academic research and field-based practice. In the first presentation, [Nathan Nunn \(University of British Columbia\)](#) presented research on the social consequences of holding traditional religious beliefs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the second presentation, [David Fuechtjohann \(GIZ\)](#) offered a practitioner's perspective, drawing on two decades of experience advising the GIZ, recently with a focus on how religious actors can be engaged as partners in development programming.

[Nathan Nunn](#) opened by noting that despite the widespread adoption of Christianity and Islam across the African continent, traditional religious beliefs, often labelled “witchcraft” in the West, remain widely held. Presenting joint research on the social consequences of these beliefs, Nunn described a study covering one city and 50 surrounding villages, with roughly 1,000 participants. To document the surrounding religious discourse, enumerators sat in on church sermons and recorded how frequently, and how positively, local traditional beliefs were mentioned. The traditional beliefs are often referred to locally as *Bokoko* (ancestors), *Kindoki* (traditional religion, closer to what is called magic or sorcery), and witch doctors. To measure the consequences of these beliefs, the study used anonymous behavioural games, a “dictator” game, and a “joy of destruction” game, in which participants received randomly assigned information about a partner, including whether that partner held Bokoko beliefs. Complementary evidence on social norms and stereotypes showed that this treatment is seen as more socially acceptable when the partner holds traditional beliefs, indicating that the discriminatory behaviour is underpinned by widely shared norms rather than isolated individual attitudes.

Nunn noted that this stigma is not simply an in-group/out-group effect: people who themselves hold traditional beliefs discriminate against others who hold them just as much, roughly 70 percent of the sample reports holding traditional beliefs (likely an undercount), which helps explain the average negative effect. Stigma persisting even among those who share the stigmatized trait, has been documented as a similar pattern for caste discrimination in India and among Venezuelan immigrants in Colombia. Across sub-Saharan Africa more broadly, regions with a longer history of missionary presence show stronger negative perceptions of traditional religion, an effect that is, if anything, even stronger among people who continue to hold these beliefs today, consistent with Christianity having contributed historically to the stigmatization of African traditional religion.

[David Fuechtjohann](#) presented a practitioner's perspective from GIZ's sector project Religion and Sustainable Development, where he has advised on topics including social cohesion, peacebuilding, and local economic development. He argued that religious actors are valuable partners for development cooperation because they are widely trusted and credible, they bring an established institutional infrastructure spanning national to local levels, including churches, monasteries, and umbrella networks, and because they share values with local populations that make it easier to reach common development goals.

As an illustration, David Fuechtjohann described a project implemented with the Lutheran World Federation in Ethiopia and Nigeria (October 2020 – November 2022) that worked through local and regional churches and Muslim organizations to counter the stigmatization faced by internally displaced persons, returnees, and refugees. Religious actors engaged in public discourse and media broadcasts to shift societal narratives around migration and were trained in mental health and psychosocial support. At the same time, migrants and returnees also received small grants to start businesses. The project's networks of partner churches proved especially valuable, and its results fed into the larger Symbols of Hope initiative led by the Lutheran World Federation.

Closing the loop with the opening poll, David Fuechtjohann pointed to further GIZ projects that engage religious actors on health, peacebuilding, social cohesion, female genital mutilation, gender-based violence, HIV and sexual and reproductive health, gender equality, and, notably, environmental protection, including a project on plastic waste in Indonesia, an area the audience had not associated with religion in the earlier poll.

On how to navigate tensions between development goals and religious or traditional teachings, David Fuechtjohann acknowledged that development actors face real limits, particularly with more extreme actors, and that the practical approach is to identify moderate voices and allies who can open a dialogue, supported by GIZ's stakeholder-mapping tools. Nunn added an academic perspective, citing research on historical pilgrimage versus crusade routes in Europe that

finds different moral orientations, more communal versus more conquest-oriented, persisting in villages along each route today.

Overall, the seminar showed that academic evidence and operational practice arrive at a complementary picture: religion is deeply intertwined with social behaviour and stigma at the individual level, as Nunn's research demonstrated, while at the same time constituting a credible, well-networked partner that development actors such as GIZ can and do engage across a wide range of sectors.

The research paper presented by Nathan Nunn during the session is provided below for reference.

- [Le Rossignol, Lowes & Nunn \(2022\), "The Social Consequences of Traditional Religion in Contemporary Africa," NBER Working Paper No. 29695](#)

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