

Religious Influences on Political Engagement:  
Insights from Sub-Saharan Africa

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Many people, including pundits and pastors, attribute great power to the ability of religious ideas to spur individuals to political action. Yet social science scholarship often treats religious ideas and beliefs as epiphenomenal to political decision-making. This tension presents a puzzle: *Do* religious ideas influence political engagement? To what extent, under what conditions, and to what end? In this project, we take advantage of the current diversity of religious ideas, communicated and interpreted through sermonic messages, across Christian denominations in Sub-Saharan Africa to explore these questions. Through a combination of observational and experimental work concentrated in Nairobi, Kenya, we argue that exposure to religious messages *can* influence individuals' decisions to engage with or disengage from politics, as well as influence the *form* that political engagement takes. However, the power of religious messages has limits: it requires constant reinforcement and its effects are content-dependent. These findings help address conflicting portrayals of religion's role in politics and suggest new directions for researching how religious ideas interact with context to shape political behavior.