

# How human capital reshapes religious affiliation



*Belief in supernatural forces and participation in religious rituals are deeply rooted in human societies*

Religion significantly influences people's lives, both socially and economically. Researchers have long debated whether economic growth and education lead to less religious belief and participation. Yet, in many areas, strong religious beliefs persist despite economic advancements. In a [recent study](#) we delve into how economic and educational improvements in Kenya are reshaping religious affiliations, particularly the shift towards Pentecostal denominations, without necessarily affecting overall religiosity.

Central to our investigation is the shift toward Pentecostal denominations, known for their emphasis on the active role of God in daily life and more conservative social and moral attitudes. The move away from more established forms of Christianity is arguably among the most important global religious dynamics of the last half century, and is often described as a “New Reformation”. This phenomenon is notably observed in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, regions characterized by religious diversity and thriving religious marketplaces.

We use the Kenya Life Panel Survey, tracking over 5,000 individuals from early adolescence into adulthood during the 1998-2021 period. We find a notable trend: about 30% moved from traditional Christian churches to Pentecostal ones. Those with lower education and living standards were more likely to make this switch.

We also examined the impact of a school-health program (deworming intervention) on religious choices. Those who randomly benefited from this program had better health, education and economic well-being. They also tended to stick with traditional churches, rather than switching to Pentecostal denominations, suggesting that enhanced education and

health might influence religious affiliation. However, their overall level of religiosity remained unchanged.

Our findings suggest that interplay between education, economic circumstances, and religious choices is more nuanced than previously thought. People with fewer resources seem more drawn to religions like Pentecostalism, which offer a more interventionist view of God and conservative values. This may help to explain arguably the most seismic shift in global religion during the last half century, namely, the rapid spread of Pentecostalism in low-income settings. At the same time, the results support the view that belief in supernatural forces and participation in religious rituals are deeply rooted in human societies and will not automatically fade away with economic development.

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