



*Working Paper No. 113*

**RELIGIOUS FAITH AND DEMOCRACY:  
EVIDENCE FROM THE  
AFROBAROMETER SURVEYS**

by John F. McCauley and E. Gyimah-Boadi

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*by John F. McCauley and E. Gyimah-Boadi*

**September 2009**

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## Religious Faith and Democracy: Evidence from the Afrobarometer Surveys

### Abstract

This paper takes advantage of Round 4 of the Afrobarometer surveys to explore the relationship between religion and democracy in Africa. It focuses on three central concerns. First, using a new, exogenous measure of religiosity in the survey, we find that African citizens who place importance on religion are also more trusting of their presidents and other compatriots, and they tend to take a greater interest in public affairs. Second, we explore variation across religions: whereas Muslims and evangelical Christians prioritize their religions and follow public affairs to a greater degree than do others, we find no evidence to suggest that these differences have a practical effect on support for democracy. Notably, Muslims are no more or less supportive of democracy than are members of other religions in Africa. Finally, we notice what might be the beginning of a trend toward secularization among African citizens. Although the vast majority of surveyed Africans continue to place great importance on religion in their lives, preliminary cross-national and longitudinal data suggest that the importance may be starting to wane.

## I. Introduction

Religion, along with ethnicity or tribe, is one of the most critical social markers in African society. As Crawford Young notes, “religion joins ethnicity...as the earlier version of the secular state tends to fade.”<sup>1</sup> Today, belief in a divine being is as high on the African continent as anywhere in the world, days begin and end with benedictions, and religious places of worship occupy everything from empty classrooms to the shaded space under trees. Yet the place of religion in African society is not a simple one: competition takes place across much of this divided continent, not only between Islam and Christianity but also between local and foreign influences within each broad religion. What is more, traditional African religions remain an important source of influence even as their membership is threatened by the formal religious traditions.

It is in this dynamic and complex religious environment that the African democratic process moves forward. For nearly two decades, African states have embarked on democratic reforms with varying degrees of success. Much has been made, in this quest for peaceful, lasting African democracy, of the role of tribalism and ethnic groups,<sup>2</sup> yet comparatively little attention has been given to the link between religion and democracy.

This paper takes advantage of Round 4 of the Afrobarometer surveys to explore the relationship between religion and democracy in Africa. It focuses on three key questions. First, what do attachments to religion reveal about democratic preferences among Africa’s citizens? Second, is there variation across the different religions, particularly Islam and Christianity, concerning the participation of their members in the democratic process in Africa? And finally, what can be made of the trend in religious involvement on the continent? If religious attachments do contribute to the democratic process, then a changing religious landscape may have concomitant effects on the political environment in Africa.

Round 4 of the Afrobarometer surveys includes over 26,000 individual-level observations from 19 different countries (having added Burkina Faso and Liberia to the previous round). On one hand, this still represents a minority of states on the continent, even if North Africa is excluded, and the inclusion of countries is biased toward more open societies. On the other hand, however, the survey includes citizens from a variety of religio-political environments: Senegalese and Malian respondents offer insight from almost entirely Muslim societies, whereas Namibia and Zambia are equally as Christian. Respondents from Benin and Tanzania provide a perspective from religiously mixed communities. In Nigeria and Mozambique, many respondents undoubtedly have memories of violence in the name of religion, whereas in Cape Verde religion inspires very little political action. Thus, the survey population for Round 4, coupled with a new survey question regarding the importance of religion, provides a source of data rich enough that researchers may begin uncovering the under-studied relationship between religious faith and democracy in Africa.

## II. The Variable of Interest

In previous rounds of the Afrobarometer survey, researchers interested in the role of religion in African society had to rely solely on information regarding membership in religious organizations and attendance at religious services. In Round 4, a new survey question was added; respondents were asked, “How important is religion in your life?” This question allows researchers to analyze the role of religion in African democracy in a new light.

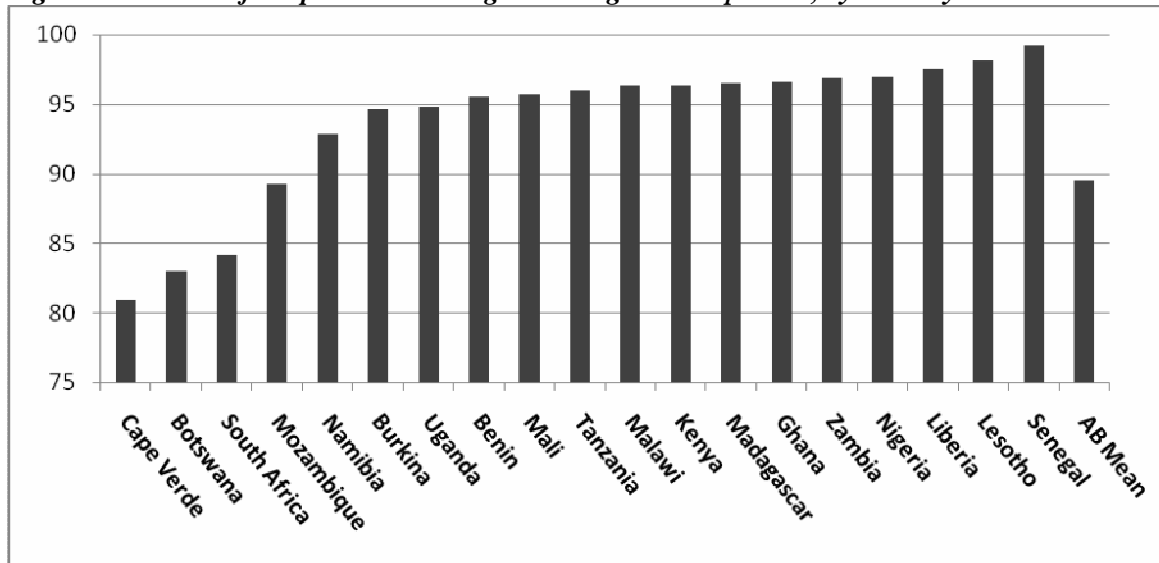
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<sup>1</sup> Crawford Young, *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The Nation-State at Bay?* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), p. 15. Young applied the same analysis to parts of South Asia as well as Africa.

<sup>2</sup> See, among others, Richard Joseph, *State, Conflict, and Democracy in Africa* (Lynne Reiner, Boulder, 1999); Daniel Posner, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005); Stephen Orvis, “Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism in Kenya’s ‘Virtual Democracy,’” *African Issues* 29, 1, 2001; Robert Dowd and Michael Driessen, “Ethnically Dominated Party Systems And The Quality Of Democracy: Evidence From Sub-Saharan Africa.” *Afrobarometer Working Paper* No. 92, 2008.

The variable confirms, first of all, the expansive nature of religious faith in African society: just 3 percent of surveyed respondents call religion “not at all important” in their lives, and another 3 percent state that religion is “not very important.” Approximately, 10 percent of respondents call religion “somewhat important,” and fully 81 percent label religion a “very important” factor in their lives. Figure 1 illustrates that even in the least religious of surveyed African countries (Cape Verde), over 80 percent of respondents claim that religion is somewhat or very important to them. The high degree of religiosity on the continent, as well as the cross-national variation in religiosity that Figure 1 reveals, are issues to which we return later in the paper.

**Figure 1. Percent of Respondents Stating that Religion is Important, by Country**



Note: Figures represent percent of respondents in each country calling religion “somewhat important” or “very important.”

What advantages does a self-reported measure of the importance of religion provide? Survey information regarding membership and attendance is often preferable in that it measures actual behaviors, rather than just attitudes. The disadvantage of membership data, however, is that in trying to explain the role of religion in the democratic process, researchers are confronted with an endogeneity problem: the same characteristics that lead African citizens to participate in the democratic process also lead them to be active in their local churches and mosques, regardless of their level of faith in the divine. In other words, some individuals are simply more active in their communities—this leads them to go to church or mosque just as it leads them to get involved in politics. It is thus difficult to construct causal stories linking the former to the latter.

The new survey question regarding the importance of religion in one’s life offers an escape from this problem of endogeneity. While it is true that the question measures attitudes, which are notoriously amorphous (as well as unverifiable) relative to a concrete behavior like membership, there is no reason to believe that Afrobarometer respondents were any less forthcoming regarding their belief in the importance of religion than they were in reporting their religious group memberships and attendance. Furthermore, for the first time, researchers are able to draw links between the faith that individuals have in the divine (an exogenous factor) and their political preferences and involvement (the outcomes of interest). In short, causal relationships, if only suggestive, can now be plausibly developed.

Furthermore, the measure of religious membership and the measure of the importance of religion in one’s life are not simply two measures of the same thing. The correlation coefficient between the two variables is only 0.20, suggesting that the link between taking part in religious activities and placing importance in the divine are only loosely related. In fact, almost half (45 percent) of those respondents who state that they belong to

no religious group also say that religion is “somewhat” or “very” important in their lives. Thus, we can be fairly comfortable with the assertion that attitudes about the importance of religion capture something other than community activism. As we have insinuated, we suggest that the question captures the faith that African citizens place in the divine.

Finally, relatively low variation on the variable of interest—a byproduct of the fact that almost all Africans call religion important—decreases the leverage we might hope to gain from religious importance in explaining key democratic outcomes. Thus, to the extent that we find this fairly homogeneous variable to matter, which we do, it suggests a very deep divide in political preferences between the large majority that prioritizes religion and the few who do not. In this sense, focusing on self-reported religious faith may provide a means for exploring an otherwise unaccounted for but nevertheless critical fissure in African society.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, membership and attendance are still important indicators of the role of religion in African society, particularly in terms of trends over time. We return to this issue in Part V of the paper.

### **III. The Importance of Religion and Participation in Democracy**

In this section, we evaluate several outcomes that we believe to be important attributes of democratic citizenship. The key explanatory variable is the importance that individuals place on religion.

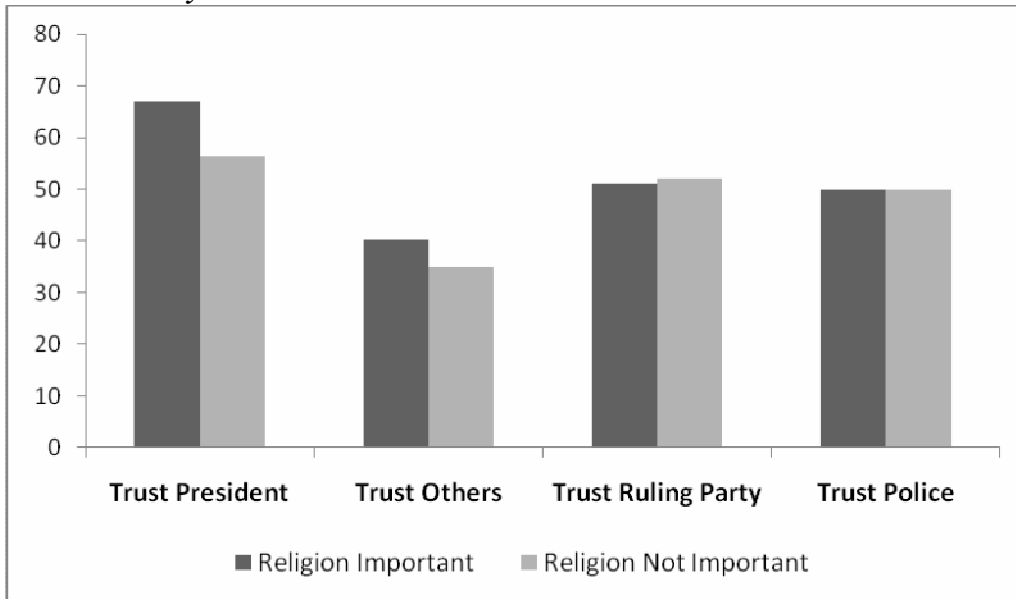
#### *Trust in Key Players in Democracy*

Having faith in the divine is an attitude that serves individuals not just in a possible afterlife, but also during their existence as members of democratic societies. We suggest that Africans who give importance to religion, either as a result of their upbringing or due to significant personal events, learn that it is acceptable to have confidence in key players despite ignorance about their future conduct. The evidence supports this claim. As Figure 2 illustrates, individuals who state that religion is important in their lives are also significantly more likely to trust their president (67 percent vs. 56 percent) and to trust other compatriots (40 percent vs. 35 percent). In difference of means tests, both of these differences are significant at the 99-percent confidence level. Interestingly, increased trust in democratic players is not a blind characteristic of the religious—those who place importance in religion are no more likely than other respondents to trust the ruling party or the police.

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<sup>3</sup> The authors are grateful to Michael Bratton for drawing attention to this point.

**Figure 2. Relationship between the Importance Individuals Place in Religion and their Trust in Key Democratic Players.**



Note: Y-axis denotes the percent of respondents who respond “somewhat” or “a lot” to the question, “How much trust do you have in (selected person or entity)?” “Religion Important” refers to respondents who state that religion is somewhat or very important in their lives.

Because other characteristics may cause people both to place importance in religion and to be more trusting, Table 1 considers the same relationships in a multivariate regression framework. The dependent variables are ordered measures of trust, where 1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = somewhat, and 4 = a lot. Importance of Religion is also an ordered variable (coded 0 for “not at all important” up to 3 for “very important”). Urban and Male are dichotomous variables. Education is coded on a scale from 0 (no schooling) up to 9 (post-graduate education). Standard of Living is a composite variable with values ranging from 2-15, which includes three components: access to local services, such as roads and health clinics (0-5), access to individual necessities such as food and fuel (1-5), and a personal evaluation of present living conditions (1-5). All regressions are ordered logit models with religious group fixed effects and with robust standard errors clustered by country, an acknowledgement of the fact that responses from within each country may not be independent from one another with respect to the outcomes of interest.

The analyses indicate that, even controlling for a host of demographic factors, the importance that individuals place on religion has a positive effect on their levels of trust in the president and in other compatriots. Rural dwellers and the less educated also tend to be more trusting of their president and fellow countrypersons. As a robustness check (not shown), we added religious group membership as a control variable, and even when this measure of community activism is included, the importance that one attaches to religion remains a significant predictor of trust in the president and in other compatriots.

It is worth asking, is the increased trust in presidents that comes with religious importance a social benefit, or is skepticism a healthy component of democratic accountability? We remain agnostic on this question, except to note that trust is required in order for democratic processes, particularly election cycles, to take their course. Even when promised improvements fail to materialize, democracy demands that we give the president his constitutionally allotted time to affect change, leading some scholars to label trust a critical



component of stable democracies.<sup>4</sup> The Round 4 Afrobarometer data suggest that religious faith contributes positively to this kind of trust in the system.

**Table 1. Determinants of Trust in Key Democratic Players**

	Trust President	Trust Other Compatriots	Trust Ruling Party	Trust Police
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Importance of Religion	0.12 *** (0.03)	0.07 ** (0.03)	0.06 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)
Urban (1/0)	-0.42 *** (0.08)	-0.23 *** (0.06)	-0.51 *** (0.08)	-0.25 ** (0.09)
Age	0.005 * (0.003)	0.01 *** (0.001)	0.004 (0.003)	0.006 ** (0.002)
Male (1/0)	0.04 (0.05)	0.15 *** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.001 (0.04)
Education	-0.10 *** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.12 *** (0.03)	-0.14 *** (0.03)
Standard of Living	0.05 (0.03)	-0.001 (0.01)	0.08 *** (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)
Cutpoints	-1.17 0.06 1.10	-0.36 1.14 2.50	-0.89 0.34 1.43	-0.93 0.30 1.42
Religion Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES	YES
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02
N	23082	23997	23132	23610

*Notes:* Ordered logit estimations with standard errors in parentheses. \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001. The four dependent variable outcomes regarding trust are “not at all,” “a little,” “somewhat,” and “a lot.”

### *Democratic Support and Involvement*

Just as faith in the divine encourages African citizens to maintain trust in their president, we also hypothesize that those who place importance in religion may demonstrate greater support for and involvement in the democratic process. Scholars argue that faith in the divine often translates into greater feelings of self-worth, as the faithful tend to view their lives on Earth as serving a purpose.<sup>5</sup> Those feelings of self-worth, in turn, may encourage African citizens to support and involve themselves in citizen-led government (i.e. democracy).

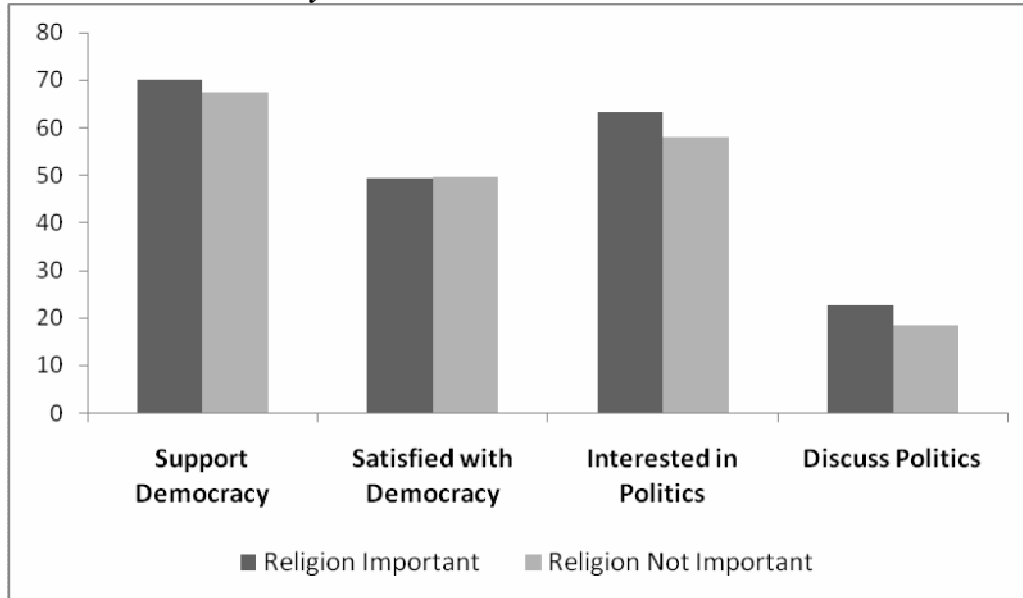
We find mild support for these hypotheses in the data. As Figure 3 illustrates, individuals who place importance in religion are slightly more likely to support democracy, to take an interest in public policy, and to discuss politics. These differences are significant at the 95-percent confidence level. In spite of their support and involvement, however, the faithful are no more satisfied with the democratic outcomes they

<sup>4</sup> Susan Rose-Ackerman, “Trust, Honesty, and Corruption: Reflections on the State-Building Process,” *Yale Law School Working Paper No. 255*, 2001; Joseph Asunka, E. Gyimah-Boadi, and Robert Mattes, “Religion and Democratic Development in Africa: Evidence from the Afrobarometer,” Unpublished Manuscript, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge, New York, 1905 [2001, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition]); Lynne Friedli, “A Matter of Faith: Religion and Mental Health,” *Journal of Public Mental Health* 2, 2 (May) 2000.

experience than are their non-religious counterparts. Again, this may suggest that those who place faith in the divine learn to offer support even in the absence of concrete evidence in the here-and-now.

**Figure 3. Relationship between the Importance Individuals Place in Religion and their Support and Involvement in Democracy.**



Note: Y-axis denotes percents. Support for Democracy refers to respondents who state that democracy is always preferable. Satisfaction with Democracy refers to respondents who state that they are fairly or very satisfied with democracy. Interest in Politics is measured by responses of “somewhat interested” or “very interested” in public affairs. Those who state that they frequently discuss politics are coded as Discussing Politics.

We also examined these findings in a regression framework (not shown here; some results are shown in section IV). The results suggest that individual faith in religion remains positively associated with support for democracy, interest in political issues, and discussion of politics. Some of this effect can be attributed simply to community involvement, but even when we control for religious group membership (an indication of community involvement, as noted earlier), faith is positively correlated with interest in politics.

#### IV. Variation Across Religions

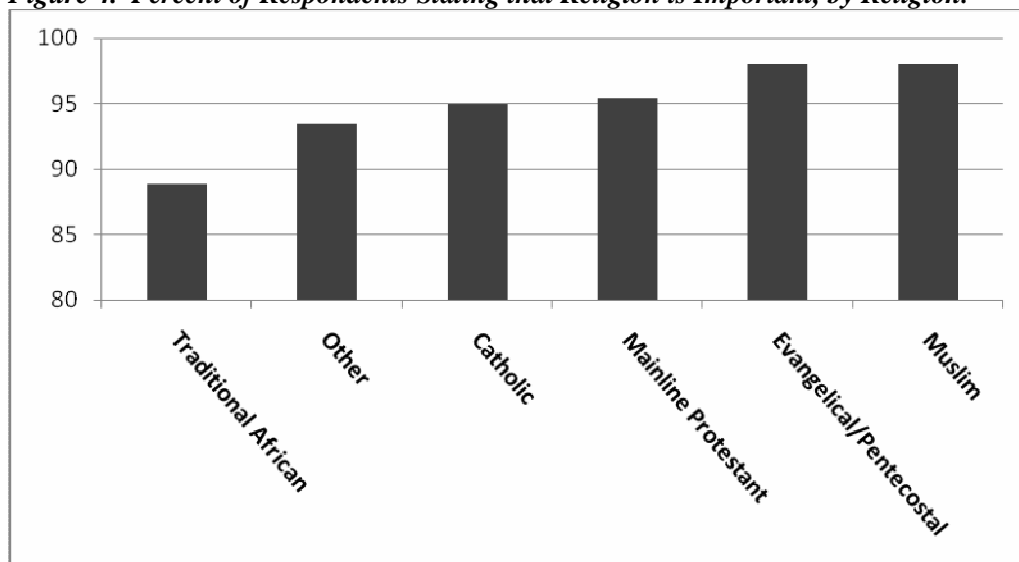
Are differences in attachments to religion apparent across different religious groups? If so, do these differences have an impact on the democratic process? The claim is sometimes made, for example, that Islam is not compatible with democracy: Huntington famously stated that Islam’s failure to distinguish between religious and political authority undermines the potential for democracy in Muslim countries, and Lewis suggests, using Turkey as a foil, that Muslim countries that fail to adopt secular institutions also fail to democratize.<sup>6</sup> In this section, we explore potential variation across religious groups and we consider whether these differences matter in the application of democracy.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1996); Bernard Lewis, “Why Turkey is the Only Muslim Democracy,” *Middle East Quarterly* 1, 1 (March) 1994. See Michael Bratton, “Briefing: Islam, Democracy, and Public Opinion in Africa,” *African Affairs* 102 (2003) for a brief summary of both sides of the argument.

Some religions demand more of their members than do others. Scholars have long noted, for example, that Islam influences society and politics in a way that mainline Christian groups do not.<sup>7</sup> A more recent phenomenon on the African continent has been the explosion of evangelical, pentecostal Christian churches, often modeled after (and financed by) American evangelical churches.<sup>8</sup> Distinguishing themselves from Catholicism and the mainline Protestant churches, which over the last century have offered a moderate form of Christianity tolerant of many traditional African practices, this new form of “health and wealth” evangelical churches is expressly foreign in its roots. The churches create fairly exclusive groups, place greater emphasis on the avoidance of social vices, and congregate more often than their mainline counterparts.<sup>9</sup> As a result, it should not be surprising to find that evangelical Christians, as well as Muslims, place the greatest importance on religion.

Figure 4 supports this claim. We disaggregated the Afrobarometer respondents by broad religious group (Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, Traditional, Other, and none), and we further separated those who labeled themselves evangelical/charismatic Christians from the mainline Protestants. Too few Muslims labeled themselves as members of a particular sub-group to make a similar disaggregation fruitful within Islam. The figure presents the proportion of respondents from each major religious group who state that religion is “somewhat” or “very” important in their lives. So as not to distort the scale, we omit the category of No Religion (agnostics and atheists), 55 percent of whom call religion not at all or not very important.

**Figure 4. Percent of Respondents Stating that Religion is Important, by Religion.**



Note: Figures represent the percent of respondents in each country calling religion “somewhat important” or “very important.” Not shown are respondents professing to belong to no religion, 45 percent of whom state that religion is somewhat or very important. The Afrobarometer mean is 89.5 percent.

The data indicate that, despite universally high levels of expressed religiosity, variation exists across religions: the proportion of both Muslims and evangelical Christians who state that religion is important is three percentage points higher than the figure for Catholics and mainline Protestants. In difference of means tests, these differences are significant at the 99-percent confidence level. Evangelical Christians, who make up approximately 9 percent of the surveyed respondents, are also significantly more likely than mainline

<sup>7</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam: Second Edition*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966 [2002]); Jeffrey Haynes, *Religion in Third World Politics* (Lynne Reiner, Boulder, 1994); Ann Elizabeth Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics* (Westview, Boulder, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Paul Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori. *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2007).

Protestants to be active members of their religious organizations (61 percent vs. 53 percent).<sup>10</sup> Those attaching the least importance to religion in the Afrobarometer survey are practitioners of traditional African religions followed by those practicing other religions, notably Hinduism, Bahai, and Buddhism.

The personal and social importance of religion, however, is only a starting point. Our primary concern here is in testing the claim that the particular religions people practice have an effect on their willingness to embrace democracy. In short, we find that they do not.

Table 2 presents the determinants of selected democratic attributes in a multivariate regression framework. Column 1 considers respondents' support for democracy, where a response of 1 indicates that the difference between a democratic and a non-democratic regime does not matter to the respondent, 2 indicates that a non-democratic regime is sometimes preferable, and 3 indicates that democratic rule is always preferable. The results suggest that males and the more educated tend to be stronger supporters of democracy, but importantly, *no religious group* is significantly more or less likely than the omitted group (mainline Protestants) to support democracy. Column 2 explains respondents' interest in public affairs, using a 0-3 scale (0 indicates no interest; 3 indicates that the respondent is very interested). Here, older respondents, males, and the educated are all predictably more likely to show an interest in public affairs. Among religious groups, Muslims and evangelical Christians are more likely than the omitted category (mainline Protestants) to show an interest in policy, which is in keeping with the relatively encompassing nature of these two particular religious traditions. This does not translate, however, into a greater likelihood that Muslims or evangelicals will question authority: Column 3 shows that, whereas males and more educated respondents are more likely to question leaders as opposed to respecting authority,<sup>11</sup> no religious group stands out as being more or less likely to question leadership.

Our answer, then, to the question of whether or not there are differences across religions, is yes and no. Muslims and evangelical Christians in Africa tend to incorporate their religious views into other aspects of their lives to a greater degree than do practitioners of other religions. As a result, members of these groups place greater importance on religion and tend to be more interested in public affairs (in all likelihood to gauge the degree to which their religious views are respected politically). Yet, the greater social importance that Muslims and evangelical Christians give to their religions does not translate into greater or lesser support for democracy. Furthermore, Muslims are no more or less likely to challenge political leadership. Though the relationship between Islam and democracy may be more complicated in other parts of the world, African Muslims are as supportive of democracy as are African Catholics, Protestants, traditionalists, and others, a result which is in keeping with findings from the first round of Afrobarometer surveys.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Muslims, conversely, are less likely to be active members, owing to the fact that African Islam places less emphasis on regular ceremony attendance than do its Christian counterparts. Approximately 34 percent of Muslims call themselves active members.

<sup>11</sup> On a scale of 1-4, where 1 indicates a strong preference for questioning leaders and 4 indicates a strong preference for respecting authority.

<sup>12</sup> Afrobarometer, "Islam, Democracy, and Public Opinion in Africa," *Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 3*, September 2002.

**Table 2. Determinants of Selected Democratic Attributes.**

	Support Democracy	Interested in Public Affairs	Respect Authority
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Urban (1/0)	0.08 (0.08)	-0.16 * (0.07)	-0.06 (0.06)
Age	0.006 * (0.003)	0.01 *** (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)
Male (1/0)	0.23 *** (0.05)	0.53 *** (0.04)	-0.12 ** (0.04)
Education	0.07 ** (0.03)	0.09 *** (0.02)	-0.11 *** (0.02)
Standard of Living	-0.01 (0.02)	0.001 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Muslim (1/0)	0.16 (0.19)	0.29 * (0.14)	-0.11 (0.11)
Catholic (1/0)	0.02 (0.11)	0.03 90.14)	0.02 (0.07)
Evangelical (1/0)	0.08 (0.15)	0.14 * (0.07)	0.08 (0.08)
Traditional (1/0)	0.17 (0.18)	0.23 (0.15)	0.21 (0.14)
Other Religion (1/0)	-0.01 (0.19)	0.18 (0.15)	-0.01 (0.22)
No Religion (1/0)	-0.01 (0.16)	0.001 (0.11)	0.04 (0.13)
Importance of Religion	0.06 (0.06)	0.14 *** (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)
Cutpoints	-1.14 -0.28	-0.12 0.88 2.13	-0.78 0.32 1.34
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.02	0.01
N	22638	24180	23587

Notes: Ordered logit estimations with standard errors in parentheses. \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001.

## V. Trends in Religious Involvement in Africa

The exceedingly high rate of expressed religiosity in Africa—again, over 90 percent of respondents call religion somewhat or very important in their lives—is itself an important component of the sociopolitical environment on the continent. Buoyed by widespread poverty and the “existential insecurity” that encourages residents to seek solace in a possible afterlife,<sup>13</sup> religiosity in Africa has also benefited from the ongoing transformation of the religious landscape. The practice of traditional African religions (which, we noted, spark weaker expressed religiosity) has declined from approximately 20 percent of the sub-Saharan population in 1970<sup>14</sup> to just 2 percent of respondents in the Round 4 Afrobarometer survey, and in their place waves of evangelical and Muslim proselytization have generated more practitioners of the most

<sup>13</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2004).

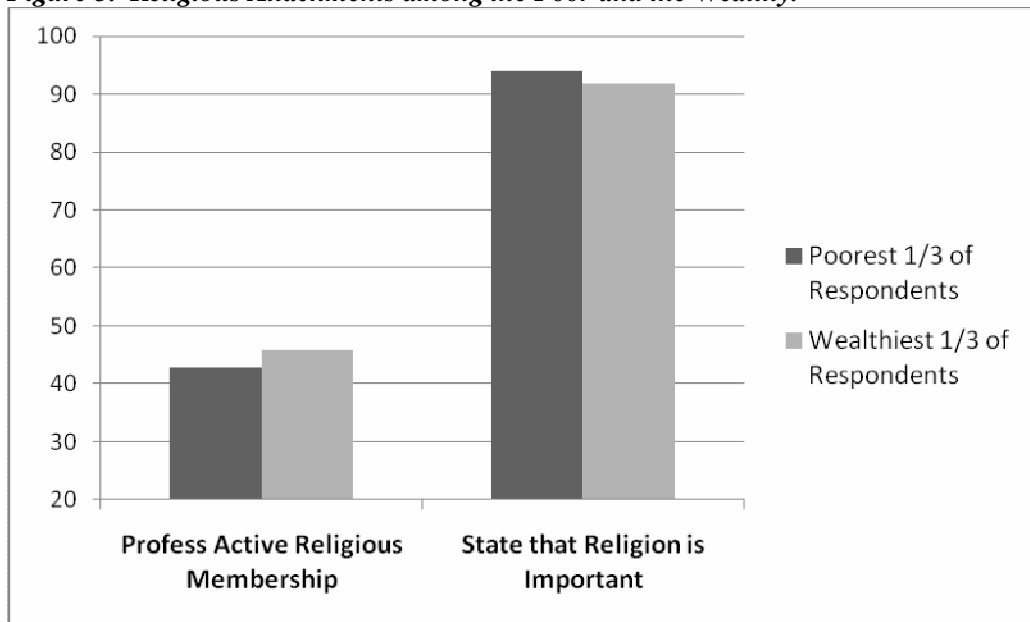
<sup>14</sup> World Christian Database. <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/about/religions.asp>.

encompassing religions on the continent. In this context, it is hardly surprising that attachments to religion would remain so predominant.

Setting aside this widespread faith in the divine, we consider what the trajectory is for religious attachments on the continent. Put another way, is secularization—a trend away from religion that some argue comes with rising economic development and an embrace of rational, scientific explanations<sup>15</sup>—evident in the Afrobarometer survey results?

We consider the possibility of African secularization in three different ways. The first is to ask whether well-to-do African respondents are less religious than their poor counterparts. To do so, we compare the proclaimed importance of religion among the lowest third of respondents versus the highest third on our Standards of Living composite variable. We also compare active membership in religious organizations among these two groups. Figure 5 shows that, although the wealthy are more likely to be active members of religious organizations (which, again, may only be a proxy for community activism), they are less likely to state that religion is important in their lives (92 percent vs. 94 percent). However, although these results are significant in difference of means tests, the effect of Standard of Living is not statistically different from zero in either multivariate regression analysis (using active membership and importance of religion as the dependent variables).

**Figure 5. Religious Attachments among the Poor and the Wealthy.**



Note: Y-axis denotes percents. Active Religious Membership is derived from the question asking if respondents are not members, inactive members, or active members (along with official leaders) of a religious organization. Religious Importance refers to respondents who state that religion is somewhat or very important in their lives. The categories of wealth are derived from a composite measure that includes access to services, access to necessities, and a personal evaluation of current living conditions.

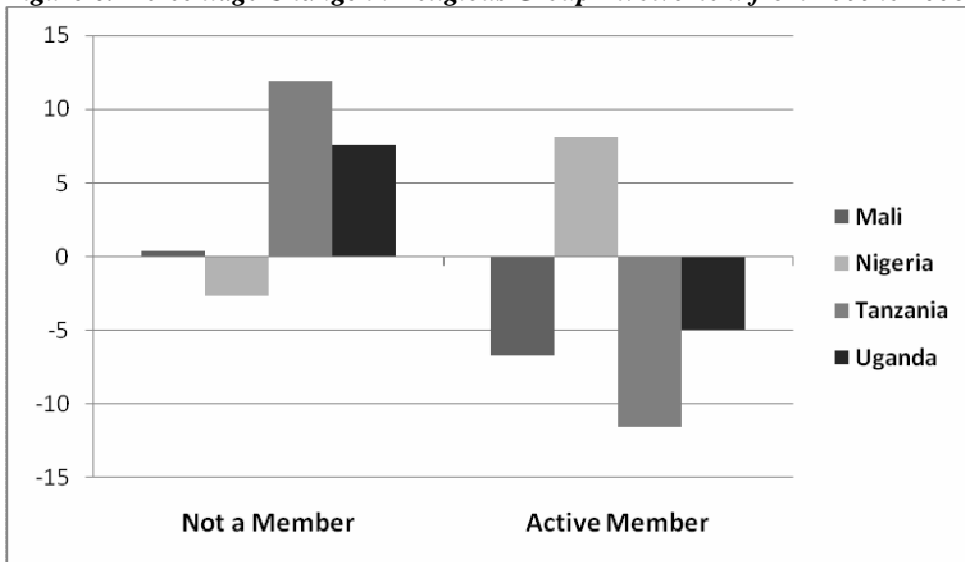
Secondly, we track changes in religiosity from Round 1 of the Afrobarometer surveys to the current Round 4 results. We are unable to consider the importance of religion in individuals’ lives (since the question was not asked in previous rounds), and the question regarding religious group membership is consistent from Round 1 to Round 4 in only four countries, Mali, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda. Four countries are far too few to draw general conclusions. Nevertheless, the four are representative in that among them are a predominantly Muslim country (Mali), a predominantly Christian country (Uganda), and two religiously mixed countries,

<sup>15</sup> For explanations and evidence, see Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Doubleday, Garden City NY, 1967); Steve Bruce, *Choice and Religion* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999).

one with a cooperative relationship between Christians and Muslims (Tanzania) and one that has experienced recent tensions between its Christian and Muslim populations (Nigeria). Thus, we present the evidence as illustrative of a possible trend in African countries.

What this simple, four-country comparison from Round 1 to Round 4 suggests is that religious activity is on the decline (see Figure 6). In three of the four countries, the proportion of respondents who describe themselves as not being members of a religious group has risen and the proportion stating that they are active members of a religious group has declined.<sup>16</sup> In Mali, the number of respondents stating that they are inactive members of religious organizations (a subgroup not shown in the figure) increased by over six percentage points, while the number of active members fell by about the same amount. In Tanzania, the proportion claiming not to be a member of a religious organization at all increased by almost 12 percentage points, while the numbers claiming to be active members fell by eleven percentage points. In Uganda, the proportion claiming no religious membership rose by 7.5 percentage points, offset by decrease in active membership of 5 percentage points. Only in Nigeria, where sporadic Muslim-Christian conflict left at least 3000 dead in the interim between the Round 1 and Round 4 surveys, does the trend appear to be toward greater religiosity.

**Figure 6. Percentage Change in Religious Group Involvement from 2000 to 2008.**



Note: Y-axis denotes the percent change from Round 1 (2000) to Round 4 (2008) in the proportion of respondents in each country stating that they are not members/active members of a religious organization.

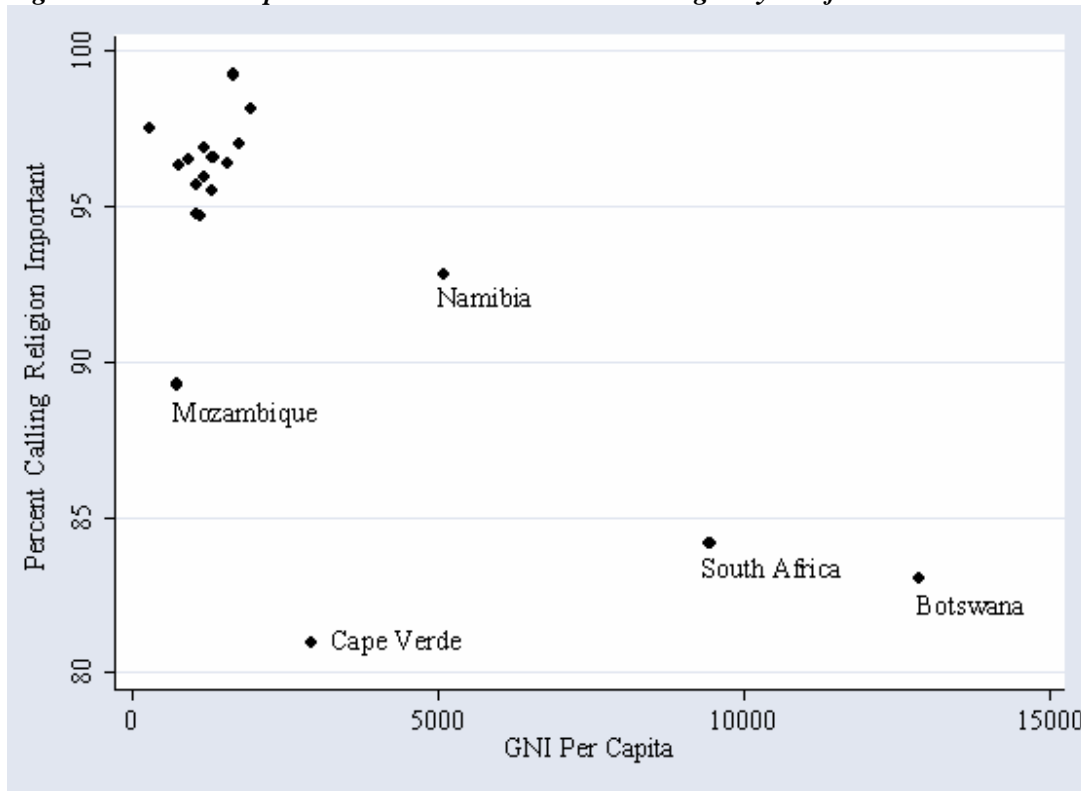
Finally, we consider differences in religious attachments across countries in the Afrobarometer survey. Figure 1 above illustrates notable variation across countries with respect to the importance that individuals place on religion: whereas more than 99 percent of Senegalese respondents state that religion is important in their lives, the figure in Cape Verde is nearly 20 percentage points lower. What stands out is that the countries with the lowest rates of expressed religiosity also tend to be among the wealthiest states in Africa. Indeed, figure 7 shows that the four wealthiest countries in terms of per capita Gross National Income<sup>17</sup> (Botswana, South Africa, Namibia, and Cape Verde) are all among the bottom five in terms of the percentage calling religion somewhat or very important in their lives. In other words, these countries are in the bottom quartile in terms of religiosity. We place little stock in any apparent linear relationship, due to the clustering

<sup>16</sup> Figure 5 omits the category of “inactive members” for visual clarity. The surveys in Mali, Tanzania, and Uganda distinguish between “active member” status and “official leader” status. Because that distinction is not made in the Round 1 Nigeria survey, we aggregate those categories in order to present consistent findings for the four countries.

<sup>17</sup> In purchasing power parity terms, from the World Bank’s 2007 World Development Indicators. <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/DATASTATISTICS/0,,contentMDK:20535285~menuPK:1192694~pagePK:64133150~piPK:64133175~theSitePK:239419,00.html>.

of poor countries and a few wealthy ones that drive the relationship, but we present the figure as suggestive visual evidence of the difference in religiosity between the wealthiest and poorest of Africa’s countries.

**Figure 7. Relationship Between National Wealth and Religiosity in Africa.**



Note: The x-axis presents 2007 per capita Gross National Income in purchasing power parity terms. The y-axis presents the percentage of respondents in each of the 19 Afrobarometer countries who call religion “somewhat important” or “very important” in their lives.

Alternatively, it could be that religiosity at the national level is shaped not by levels of wealth, which might imply the presence of consistent economic growth across African countries, but rather by rates of growth, which would suggest that attachments to religion expand as residents fall into poverty and dissipate as they climb out of poverty. A bivariate comparison of national-level religiosity and economic growth rates, however, shows no apparent relationship (see Appendix A for figures). The implication is that, to the extent that secularization is evident in Africa, it is less a function of short-term changes in conditions and more a sticky response to income levels over the longer-term. In any case, it would appear that in even within a region where “existential insecurity” is generally high, differences in religiosity are beginning to emerge, both at the national- and individual-level, between the haves and have-nots. The results are far from conclusive, but if a trend in religiosity exists in Africa, it appears to be one toward secularization.

## VI. Conclusion

Religion remains an integral part of African society. What we have attempted to do in this paper is to draw on the Round 4 Afrobarometer survey data to explore how this important social marker may impact some key democratic attributes. We also consider how religiosity may be undergoing change in Africa.

Our findings can be grouped into three categories. First, we find that religious faith has a positive effect on political trust and involvement. African citizens who place importance on religion also are more trusting of their presidents and other compatriots, and they tend to take greater interest in public affairs. This is true



independent of the fact that they may be active community members and frequent attendees of religious meetings. A possible explanation for their increased political trust and involvement is that religious faith teaches individuals in Africa both to be patient with worldly (political) processes and to value the contributions that they might make in their time on Earth. Second, we demonstrate that significant social variation exists across different religions: Muslims and evangelical Christians place greater importance on their religions and pay greater attention to public affairs, presumably because these traditions tend to be more encompassing in the lives of their practitioners. On the other hand, we find no evidence to suggest that these differences have a practical effect on support for democracy. Muslims are no more or less supportive of democracy than are members of other religions in Africa. Finally, we notice what might be the beginning of a trend toward secularization among African citizens. Wealthier individuals place slightly less importance on religion, religious group activity has declined slightly in the three countries for which we have data over time, and the wealthiest African countries also have the lowest proportions of individuals who prioritize religion.

What, then, is the future for religion and democracy in Africa? It may be that secular skepticism fosters the kind of challenges that African democracies will need to strengthen the democratic reforms already underway. On the other hand, if trust and involvement are seen as positive attributes for democratic citizens, and if the apparent trend toward secularization is a real one in Africa, then African leaders and societies will eventually need to find new ways of cultivating trust and involvement among their citizens. That day, however, is still in the distant future, as faith in the divine remains a hallmark of African citizens.

**Appendix A. Religiosity, Wealth, and Economic Growth among Afrobarometer Countries.**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Percent Religious</b>	<b>GNI Per Capita</b>	<b>Growth Rate</b>
Benin	95.5	1310	4.6
Botswana	83.0	12880	5.3
Burkina Faso	94.7	1120	4.0
Cape Verde	80.9	2940	6.9
Ghana	96.6	1320	6.3
Kenya	96.4	1550	7.0
Lesotho	98.2	1940	4.9
Liberia	97.5	280	9.4
Madagascar	96.5	930	6.2
Malawi	96.3	760	7.9
Mali	95.7	1040	2.8
Mozambique	89.3	730	7.3
Namibia	92.8	5100	5.9
Nigeria	97.0	1760	5.9
Senegal	99.3	1650	4.8
South Africa	84.1	9450	5.1
Tanzania	95.9	1200	7.1
Uganda	94.8	1040	7.9
Zambia	96.9	1190	6.0

Note: Percent Religious is the percentage of respondents who state that religion is somewhat or very important in their lives. GNI Per Capita is measured in purchasing power parity terms. Both GNI Per Capita and Growth Rate are taken from the World Bank's 2007 World Development Indicators.

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