

Religious vs. Secular NGOs: A Case for Differentiated Study Through an Institutional
Isomorphism Lens

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Abstract

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Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a vital role in addressing societal issues, often filling gaps left by state and corporate institutions. Existing literature tends to overlook key differences between secular and religious NGOs, especially when discussing the non-profit field's exhibition of corporate institutional isomorphism. This paper compares the largest—by published IRS revenue—ten secular and ten religious international development organizations through analysis of leadership backgrounds and organization websites, finding significant differences in secular and religious leadership's past work experiences, as well as distinctive organizational self-concepts described on the organizations' websites. This paper advocates for a more nuanced research approach that evaluates religious affiliation's effect on isomorphic tendencies in order to more accurately understand the NGO field.

Introduction

Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) occupy a uniquely positioned space between the US private and philanthropic sectors. They operate with similar organizational hierarchies as for-profit businesses, but their work is generally oriented around programs that address societal issues, needs, or shortcomings that the state cannot or has chosen not to directly fill. NGOs also span a large variety of fields—healthcare, education, housing, advocacy, etc.—so work in a diversity of institutional settings that have their own practices. Faith-led NGOs then integrate religiosity for an added layer of complexity, creating a challenging organizational and institutional research environment due to the murkiness of intersectional motivations, identities and norms. Yet, there is little to no differentiation between religious and non-religious (secular hereafter) NGOs in organizational literature. Without acknowledging potentially foundational differences between these two organizational types, study findings may leave out key organizational processes or mechanisms that could help explain a myriad of outcomes like an NGO’s operations, program impact and effectiveness, or funding strategies.

The reported revenue for all religious-designated 501(c)(3) registered organizations was \$44.8 billion in 2021, so represents a significant portion of the total non-profit space (*Organization Search / Cause IQ*, n.d.). This paper highlights key areas of variance between secular and religious NGOs in order to advocate for a more nuanced research approach when studying secular and religious organizations in academic settings. I do so by investigating two facets of these organizational groups, leadership backgrounds and organization websites. First, I conduct a preliminary analysis of NGOs’ leadership backgrounds to test whether there are notable differences in their education levels and prior work experience that could have shaped religious and secular leaders differently. Second, I conduct an inductive content analysis of NGO websites’ mission, vision and values that explores whether secular and religious organizations have different self-concepts, and whether they present themselves differently to online audiences.

As I will illustrate in the literature review, religiosity of individuals within an organization has the ability affect leadership hierarchies, moral coding, program development and prioritization, market engagement, operation effectiveness, and measurement & evaluation practices. I argue that exclusion of religion or faith affiliation when studying NGOs could limit the accuracy of organizational study. In this paper, I first find that religious affiliation is

associated with a smaller social media presence. I then confirm significant differences within my sample between leader affiliation and previous experience working in for-profits and other religious NGOs. Next, I illustrate that secular and religious organizations both portray themselves as working for a cause beyond themselves, but secular organizations center their work on core human rights while religious organizations see themselves as directly in service of their faith's god. These findings and observations give insight into forces that influence religious organization's operations and impact measurement differently than their secular counterparts, and therefore should not be ignored by researchers.

Literature Review

With limited exceptions, organizational, economic and management theory do not differentiate between religious and secular NGOs when analyzing meso- and macro- levels of organizations. Their case studies sometimes involve religious organizations, but the theoretical takeaways are meant to be generalizable for all NGOs doing similar work. Grouping normally occurs instead around operational field or type (Ghasemian Sahebi et al., 2017), organization size (Bornstein, 2001), or service locality (Chowdhury et al., 2020). Sociology of religion, when looking at NGOs, tends to prioritize an organization's mission and moral boundaries in its analysis, and is not as interested in considering other organizational factors as holding equivalent importance. There are a larger number of labor and management studies that do compare religious and secular organizations, but they are almost entirely concerned with micro-level dynamics, i.e. individual's motivations, attitudes, and skillsets in relation to their faith orientation. Researching the mezzo-level differences between these types of organizations would provide essential insight on how the field can improve on successfully providing aid in an efficient, sustainable and culturally mindful manner. In the section below, I will provide a brief discussion of each concept and related set of articles that I use to frame my study.

Institutional Isomorphism

Sociological institutionalism identifies societal factors, cultural norms and power dynamics across field participants (organizations) as the determinants for organizational evolution within an institution rather than individual actors. Organizations are all influenced and impacted by the same set of determinants, leading to isomorphic outcomes. John Meyer and

Brian Rowan were the first to identify how institutional environments create formal structures within which organizations operated:

“Isomorphism with environmental institutions has some crucial consequences for organizations: (a) they incorporate elements which are legitimated externally, rather than in terms of efficiency; (b) they employ external or ceremonial assessment criteria to define the value of structural elements; and (c) dependence on externally fixed institutions reduces turbulence and maintains stability” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, pg. 349).

Since their seminal piece, non-profits have evolved into isomorphic versions of their for-profit counterparts. NGOs becoming more business-like has become well established in the literature, reviewed most in-depth by Maier et. al. (2016) across 599 sources. If sociological institutionalism accurately describes the NGO field as those authors and I posit, then NGOs of shared faiths should be affected by religious institutional factors in addition to business ones, and in turn structure themselves in isomorphic ways.

Religious vs. Secular NGO Differences

While most institutional literature across disciplines has conflated religious and secular NGOs in analyses, a seminal political science book called *NGOs and Human Rights: Comparing Faith-Based and Secular Approaches* and published in 2021 is a notable exception. The authors compare program development, operations and implementation of religious and secular organization, finding that “there are clear differences in the ways that religious and secular organizations approach human rights advocacy, conceptualize and frame human rights, and obtain funding” (Butcher and Hallward, 2021, pg. 28). The findings come from a content analysis of organizations’ websites and public materials describing their work, so there is no exploration of what internal drivers or mechanisms cause these clear differences.

Few empirical studies have directly compared secular and religious NGO impact either. One that did compared Christian microfinance organization performance to secular ones, and found that the Christian organizations significantly underperformed (Mersland et al., 2013). The study only analyzed performance, however, and did not provide a causal hypothesis or explanation for their results. A large number of studies have evaluated religious organization’s effectiveness and impact without a secular comparison. Some show the benefits of religious organizations, in crisis management for example (Sheikhi et al., 2021), but a systematic review

of literature evaluating religious organization engagement with humanitarian work concluded that effectiveness was non-standardized (Marshall, 2021).

Important to this paper in particular, one study analyzed social media presence of NGOs on Twitter (now X), using content analysis to explore what type of communication organizations used most often with their followers (Waters & Jamal, 2011). They used a random sample of 27 organizations pulled from the *Philanthropy 200* journal list, and did not compare organization types, but they did note there were two religious organization in the sample. They found wide variation in social engagement across organizations but noted that all organizations were more likely to engage in one-way communication models, i.e. they used the platform to share out information but not to engage directly with followers and comments. While this study did not differentiate between religious and secular organizations, it did show variable online presence on a platform. I expect to see a smaller online presence from religious organization leadership on LinkedIn compared to secular leaders, because of religious tendencies to view oneself as separate and apart from the unbelieving world, discussed in more detail later in this paper.

Recipient and Worker Perceptions of Religious NGOs

Specific focus on religion in the international development space first became a discussion in academic literature when describing recipient communities, not to demarcate different types of NGOs. Best verbalized by Kurt Alan Ver Beek:

“Spirituality is central to many of the daily decisions people in the 'South' make about their own and their community's development, including that of whether or not to participate in risky but potentially beneficial social action. Despite its importance, development literature and development practices have systematically avoided the topic of spirituality. This avoidance results in inferior research and less effective programmes [sic]” (2000).

Similar articles have noted the same, that development literature has often missed accounting for the level of religiosity or affiliation in the work (Bompani, 2019). Extending those findings, a later study found that in several disparate contexts that receivers of NGO aid prefer faith-based organizations over secular one, especially if the organization's affiliation matches their own faith (Heist & Cnaan, 2016). The piece did not discuss why recipient perceptions differed between secular and religious organizations, but this preference lends more support for comparative research between the two.

On the organization side, studies on volunteerism, motivation within the NGO space and aid worker professionalization have explored the difference between secular and religious NGO participants, with varying findings and results (Schnable, 2021; Herman & Renz, 2008; Prakash & Gugerty, 2010). In her book *Amateurs Without Borders*, Allison Schnable references a case study which included aid worker interviews and says “Evangelical Christian aid workers described themselves as being professional relief workers first...The NGO employees shared religious commitments with the ideologically driven groups, but their primary identification was with fellow professional aid workers” (2021, pg. 9). There is a documented belief amongst religious NGO employees that their professional skills come before their religious orientation. My study explores whether this perception of self is backed by the real comparison of education level and previous work experience.

Leadership Impact on NGO Effectiveness

Organizational literature recognizes the importance of good leadership for an organization’s culture, longevity, and effectiveness. Specifically in humanitarian aid, leaders have a measurable impact on operation smoothness and employee confidence in the work and mission (Knox clarke, 2013). One study then looks at transformational leadership in NGOs, defined as “when the employees are motivated to work for transcendental goals and higher level self-actualizing needs, rather than external pay-offs” (Shiva & Suar, 2010), and shows that this type of leader has a positive impact on NGO effectiveness. They do not differentiate between secular and religious organizations, but religious tradition is by definition transcendental, and therefore should describe religiously affiliated NGO leaders.

Beyond leaders as individuals, a significant number of organizational and management scholars focus on NGO leaderships’ impact on program performance and how that relationship does or does not mirror corporate leadership structures (Einolf, 2022; Hersberger-Langloh et al., 2021; Heimovics et. al., 1995). Others explore the leadership and power dynamics between NGO executives and board members, showing that effective executives recognize their centrality between the board, stakeholders and the organization’s mission when running the organization (Iecovich & Bar-Mor, 2007; Herman & Heimovics, 1990; Heimovics et. al., 1995). To my knowledge though, none of these sub-fields on organizational isomorphism or NGO management has attempted to differentiate between secular and religious NGOs. Without that comparison, there may be methodological errors like incorrectly assigned causal relationships, or an

incomplete picture of relevant stakeholders (ex. religious body influence). My study attempts to address this gap in the literature by evaluating whether certain leader indicators vary between secular and religious NGO leaders.

Leadership Legitimacy

In their piece on occupations and professions, Anteby et al. synthesize organizational literature to propose a three part lens—becoming, doing and relating—for how leaders are shaped (Anteby et al., 2016). Focusing on becoming, they define it as “the process by which an occupational community socializes its members into a particular set of shared cultural values, norms, and worldviews (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Like any form of socialization, this process often entails many surprises and discoveries that newcomers encounter on their path to becoming legitimate members of their new community (Louis, 1980)” (pg. 189-190). Applied to NGO leadership, their previous educational and work experience would have helped them become who they are as a leader within their current organization. Combining this becoming theory with institutional isomorphism, differences in previous experience could suggest different institutions (with different worldviews) shaped leaders into two similarly but ideologically distinct categories.

In her book *The People’s Lobby: organizational innovation and the rise of interest group politics in the United States, 1890-1925*, Elisabeth Clemens discusses the interplay of organizational form and individual repertoire (1958). Like institutional isomorphism, organizational form stems from shared models of action within a field. An individual working within an organization or group becomes familiar with its form, and so throughout their time in different contexts “master distinctive *repertoires* of organizational forms” that synthesize personal experience and cultural norms that they have been exposed to in their work and social lives (pg. 48). Clemens also highlights how organizational repertoires can be transmitted across networks that share similar cultural environments. Applied to this paper, I argue that differences in previous education and work experience, especially with regards to religious leaders who have worked for other religious NGOs in the past, may be operating with a different organizational repertoire than their secular leader counterparts.

Leadership Background Analysis

Methodology

Guided by previous literature and experience working and consulting for both religious and secular organizations, I examine the following hypotheses around religious vs. secular leaders:

1. Secular NGO leaders are more likely to have a professional social media presence on LinkedIn than Religious NGO leaders.
2. Secular NGO leaders are more likely to have a higher degree of education than Religious NGO leaders.
3. NGO leaders are more likely to have attended educational institutions that match their current secular or religious affiliation.
4. NGO leaders are more likely to have work experience in other NGOs that match their current secular or religious affiliation.
5. Secular NGO leaders are more likely to have for-profit, government and academic work experience than Religious NGO leaders.
6. Religious NGO leaders are more likely to have held other role(s) in their current organization prior to the leadership one.

In building my dataset, I chose to evaluate the leaders of the ten largest (by revenue) organizations in each group. I used the largest organizations rather than a random sample in order to minimize the chances of institutional isomorphism differences solely due to size: i.e. per the literature discussed earlier (Maier et al., 2016), the longer an organization has been operating and the larger of a player it is in its field, the more business-like it becomes. If religious organizations that are the most likely to be business-like do have significant leadership background differences from secular ones, there is more support for my proposition to expand this research to smaller organizations that are less business-like.

I began putting my dataset together by pulling data from the IRS's Exempt Organizations Business Master Files for 2023 (*Exempt Organizations Business Master File Extract (EO BMF) | Internal Revenue Service*, n.d.). Files were divided into four regions: the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic and Great Lakes, Gulf Coast and Pacific Coast, and All other. I combined the lists into a single master file, and then sorted by reported revenue amount, largest to smallest. Next, I filtered to only include X (Religion Related Spiritual Development) and Q

(International Foreign Affairs and National Security) NTEE codes to ensure I was only looking at religious organizations and organizations with international operations. I then filtered through the list to find the largest ten secular, internationally focused organizations, and the largest ten religious organizations with international operations. Because some religious organizations use the Q NTEE code rather than the X one, and some X NTEE code religious organizations do not work internationally, I first looked at whether their mission and “what we do” statements included reference to faith. I also used John Frame’s secular NGO and faith-based organization categorization typology to classify each organization (2020). Each of the ten religious ones was either faith-centered or faith-affiliated (the difference between the two is immeasurable without comment from the organizations) and so represent comparable religiosity across all. The resulting list (mission statements can be found in the Appendix) is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: List of Largest (By Revenue) Secular and Religious Internationally- focused NGOs that file in the U.S.

Secular Organizations			Religious Organizations		
Name	# of Leaders	NTEE Code	Name	# of Leaders	NTEE Code
Good 360	8	Q193	Samaritans Purse	8	X20
International Rescue Committee	18	Q710	Catholic Medical Mission Board	10	Q300
Americares Foundation	8	Q123	American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee	8	Q330
Save the Children Federation	13	Q330	Matthew 25 Ministries	12	Q193
United States Fund for UNICEF	9	Q420	Church World Service	9	Q330
Family Health International	10	Q300	Christian Aid Ministries	6	X200
Plan International	13	Q330	HIAS	25	Q710
Medecins Sans Frontiers USA (Doctors without Borders)	11	Q300	Islamic Relief USA*	7	Q123
World Central Kitchen	15	Q33	World Relief	10	Q330
America for Bulgaria Foundation	15	Q32	Adventist Development and Relief Agency	5	Q300

*Islamic Relief USA uses religious language in their “Values” statement, not in their mission statement

** Data from the IRS’s *Exempt Organizations Business Master Files*

Next, I went through the organizations’ websites and pulled each name listed on their leadership team pages. In total, there were 120 leaders across the ten secular NGOs, and 100 across the religious ones. I then went through the list and searched LinkedIn with each name, position and organization, noting whether the leader had a LinkedIn page, and whether it was complete if there was one. For each result, I recorded the below available on the profile in a master database:

- The school name(s) and type of degree(s) received (undergraduate, masters, MBA and international equivalent, JD, or PhD)
- The number of positions held at the current organization prior to their current position

- The number of positions held at other companies and organizations prior to their current organization
- The type of company or organization those positions were at (categorized by Secular NGO, Religious NGO, for-profit, government, or academic)

Once my data was recorded, I coded each school as “S” for secular or “R” for religious. I then evaluated whether there were visible numerical differences across academic history or prior work experience that would guide my analysis. Next, I created binary variables for each education and work experience variable, as well as whether a leader had held a previous role in their current organization. I used the binary yes or no variables to conduct crosstabulation analysis of the association between secular or religious affiliation of each leader and the frequency of each variable. Below are the variables tested:

Table 2: Definitions of each variable measured and recorded in creating the dataset

	Variable	Measures
Social Media Presence	Complete LinkedIn Page	If the person has a LinkedIn page with information in the "Experience" and "Education" sections
	Incomplete LinkedIn Page	If the person has a LinkedIn page, but only has their current position listed under "Experience" with nothing in the "Education" section
	No LinkedIn Page	If the person does not show up in a LinkedIn search of their name, organization and/or title
Degrees Earned	Undergraduate	If the person has a Bachelor's degree listed
	MBA	If the person has an MBA or international equivalent degree listed
	Other Masters	If the person has a Masters in any other field beyond an MBA listed
	Additional Masters	If the person has a second Masters in any other field beyond an MBA listed
	JD	If the person has a JD listed
Past Work Experiences	Doctorate	If the person has a Doctorate listed
	Religious NGO	The # of experiences working at a religious NGO different from their current organization
	Secular NGO	The # of experiences working at a secular NGO different from their current organization
	For-profit	The # of experiences working at a for-profit
	Government	The # of experiences working for the government
Current NGO Tenure	Academic	The # of experiences working at an academic institution
	Held other Roles	The # of positions the person held at their current NGO before moving into their current role
	Current Leadership Role Only	If the person did not work in other positions at the NGO prior to their current position

Results

First, I lay out the content analysis results for each hypothesis to show raw variances in the data. I then discuss the results of Fisher’s exact test and how each result does or does not support the related hypothesis.

H1: Secular NGO leaders are more likely to have a professional social media presence on LinkedIn than Religious NGO leaders.

Table 3: Frequency of secular and religious leader LinkedIn presence level

Variable	#		%	
	Secular	Religious	Secular	Religious
Complete LinkedIn Page	107	62	89%	62%
Incomplete LinkedIn Page	3	17	3%	17%
No LinkedIn Page	10	21	8%	21%

There is statistically significant association between the LinkedIn presence of secular versus religious leaders using Fisher’s exact test ($df = 2$, $p\text{-value} = 7.856^{-7}$), supporting H1. Secular leaders within this sample set have a much higher online presence on LinkedIn than their religious peers.

Of note, the gap between secular and religious organizations (3% versus 17% incomplete pages, and 8% versus 21% no page) can primarily be attributed to Christian Aid Ministries (six leaders with no LinkedIn page) and Samaritan’s Purse (six leaders with no LinkedIn page, two with incomplete ones). Christian Aid Ministries is an “Amish Mennonite, and other conservative Anabaptist groups” organization, and many sects within those groups reject the use of technology like the internet. The group does have minimal online presence but has a website. Samaritan’s Purse is non-denominational and does not fully restrict internet access but was founded by conservative evangelist Billy Graham and continues to be headed by two of his grandsons. They follow an “in the world but not of it” model, modelled after several biblical verses about standing apart from nonbelievers.

H2: Secular NGO leaders are more likely to have a higher degree of education than Religious NGO leaders.

Table 4: Frequency of highest levels of education for secular and religious leaders

Variable	#		%	
	Secular	Religious	Secular	Religious
Undergraduate	26	14	26%	20%
MBA	20	9	20%	13%
Masters	33	33	33%	48%

JD	11	7	11%	10%
PhD	10	6	10%	9%

Highest level of education received is very similar across both groups. Secular leaders tend to get more MBAs (20% versus 13%), but religious leaders earn more master’s degrees overall (48% versus 33%). There was no statistically significant association between leader affiliation and highest level of education using Fisher’s exact test (df = 1, p-value = 0.462).

Some organizational leaders received multiple types of non-sequential degrees (a JD and PhD, or an MBA and another masters for example). To ensure all degree types were accurately evaluated independently, I also tested the association between leader affiliation and each degree type individually. As with highest education level, none of the relationships were statistically significant. The Fisher’s exact test results for each degree test is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Fisher’s Exact Test evaluating association between affiliation and degree type

Education				
Degree	p-value	95% CI (Lower)	95% CI (Upper)	Estimated Odds Ratio
Undergraduate	0.3680	0.6072	4.2599	1.6002
MBA	0.3338	0.6653	3.7877	1.5471
Other Masters	0.1400	0.3394	1.1786	0.6339
Additional Masters	0.7957	0.3816	4.2748	1.2199
JD	1.0000	0.3841	3.6656	1.1463
Doctorate	0.7957	0.3816	4.2748	1.2199

H3: NGO leaders are more likely to have attended educational institutions that match their current secular or religious affiliation.

Table 6: Frequency of school type for secular and religious leaders

Variable	#				%			
	Secular		Religious		Secular		Religious	
	Secular School	Religious School	Secular School	Religious School	Secular School	Religious School	Secular School	Religious School
Undergraduate	77	10	48	17	89%	11%	74%	26%
MBA	18	4	9	2	82%	18%	82%	18%
Masters	50	3	37	10	94%	6%	79%	21%

JD	8	3	6	1	73%	27%	86%	14%
PhD	8	2	5	1	80%	20%	83%	17%

There is no notable difference between the secular or religious affiliation of schools attended by NGO leaders. The sample sizes for JD and Doctorate degrees where there is a higher percentage of religious schools attended by secular leaders than religious leaders (27% and 20% vs. 14% and 17%) were too small to offer statistical value.

H4: NGO leaders are more likely to have work experience in other NGOs that match their current secular or religious affiliation.

&

H5: Secular NGO leaders are more likely to have for-profit, government and academic work experience than Religious NGO leaders.

Table 7: Frequency of previous work experiences for secular and religious leaders

Variable	#		%	
	Secular	Religious	Secular	Religious
Religious NGOs	3	21	2%	15%
Secular NGOs	55	43	30%	30%
For-profit	78	36	42%	26%
Government	30	30	16%	21%
Academic	19	11	10%	8%

There are large differences with previous work experience, primarily with prior work at religious NGOs (15% for religious leaders versus 2% for secular ones) and for-profits (42% for secular leaders versus 26% for religious ones) that both proved statistically significant. As shown in the Fisher’s exact test table below, religious leaders were more likely to have had previous work experience at a religious NGO (df = 1, p-value = 1.898e-06), supporting H4. Secular leaders were more likely to have previous work experience at a for-profit company (df = 1, p-value = .0006), supporting part of H5. There was no statistically significant relationship between affiliation and secular NGO, government, or academic work.

Table 8: Fisher’s Exact Test evaluating association between affiliation and previous work experiences

Work Type	Previous Work Experience			
	p-value	95% CI (Lower)	95% CI (Upper)	Estimated Odds Ratio
Religious NGO	1.898e-06***	0.0145	0.2807	0.0790
Secular NGO	0.7695	0.4799	1.644	0.8891

For-profit	.0006***	1.5195	5.5013	2.8720
Government	0.1551	0.3183	1.997	0.6189
Academic	0.5534	0.5434	3.2185	1.2937

*p<.05

**p<.01

***p<.001

H6: Religious NGO leaders are more likely to have held other role(s) in their current organization prior to the leadership one.

Table 9: Frequency of secular and religious leaders' tenure at their current NGO

Variable	#		%	
	Secular	Religious	Secular	Religious
Other Roles Held	57	45	53%	63%
Current Role Only	51	26	47%	37%

Religious leaders did outnumber secular leaders in having held at least one additional role at their current organization the number of roles held at their current organization than secular leaders (63% versus 53%). The difference was not statistically significant, however (df = 1, p-value = 0.169).

Website Content Analysis

Methodology

After completing the leaders' previous experience analysis, I conducted an inductive content analysis of the organizations' website content and user navigation, with a focus on their mission, vision and values sections (Neuendorf, 2017). Before creating a coding system, I created a table with each organization and the number of leaders they had with the experience found to be statistically significant in the leadership background analysis that I could refer back when analyzing results. The colored gradient visually shows: 1) the number of leaders shaped in a religious NGO context; 2) the number of leaders shaped in a for-profit context; and 3) the number of leaders who have had prior positions in their current organizations.

Table 10: List of organizations and frequency of their leadership with relevant attributes

Organization	# Leaders	# of Leaders with Religious NGO Experience	# of Leaders with For-Profit Experience	# Leaders with Prior Positions in Current NGO
Good 360	8	0	6	6
International Rescue Committee	18	0	11	7
Americares Foundation	8	0	7	5
Save the Children Federation	13	0	8	7
United States Fund for UNICEF	9	0	5	4
Family Health International	10	0	9	3
Plan International	13	0	7	8
Medecins Sans Frontiers USA (Doctors without Borders)	11	0	5	7
World Central Kitchen	15	3	10	6
America for Bulgaria Foundation	15	0	10	4
Samaritans Purse	8	-	-	1
Catholic Medical Mission Board	10	0	4	1
American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee	8	2	4	4
Matthew 25 Ministries	12	0	2	4
Church World Service	9	4	3	6
Christian Aid Ministries	6	-	-	-
HIAS	25	8	15	16
Islamic Relief USA	7	1	3	4
World Relief	10	5	4	7
Adventist Development and Relief Agency	5	1	1	2

Next, I designed four coding categories to evaluate the language used and self-portrayal of each organization:

1. Affiliation: how does the organization situate itself in the NGO space?
2. Motivation: what does the organization share as the reason and/or motivation for their work?
3. Provisions & Service: what type of care do organizations say they aim to provide? What language do they use to describe how they go about their work, and how they frame their role in achieving their mission?
4. Accountability: who or what does the organization see themselves accountable to, and how do they measure effectiveness or impact? Is monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) mentioned?

I then searched each organization, selected their first Google result, and navigated to their “About Us” pages, noticing the structure and user interface. This initial exploration led me to add five *website structure* datapoints to my content analysis based on whether the organization had: an interstitial fundraising or solicitation page; a page, section or mention of financials; go-forward strategy; a DEI statement; and a Statement of Faith or Doctrinal Statement. Then, after

in-depth engagement with the website content, I shaped two other categories to include in my final content analysis:

5. Aid Recipients: what type of language does the organization use to describe or frame the individual and community recipients of their aid?
6. Positioning: how does the organization position itself in relation to peer organizations?

Results

Website Structure

My initial impression of organization sites was the presence of an interstitial fundraising or solicitation page. Before entering the site, six of the ten secular and four of the religious organizations had donation asks that the user must exit out of to access the rest of the site. For the secular organizations, the inclusion or exclusion of the page primarily aligned with their funding sources; the six sites that did have a solicitation page rely heavily on donor support for funding, while the three of those that did not are primarily funded by an endowment, foundation or grants, and the fourth mainly works with companies' charitable arms. There is no recognizable pattern to the inclusion of the page for religious organizations.

Every organization had a page dedicated to their financials, and either included their audited tax forms or an annual report that included them within. The language on each page was also indistinguishable between the two groups. The same was not true for inclusion or discussion of go-forward strategy. Only four secular organizations and one religious one mentioned operational strategy on their sites.

There was a clear divide on the inclusion of a DEI page or statement, as five of the ten secular organizations included one and none of the religious ones did. While there is no way to track when these statements were added, I suggest that the focus on DEI within secular organizations coincides with the rise of public support for DEI efforts in the for-profit space following the murder of George Floyd and resulting expansion of the BLM movement in 2020. While some religious sects engaged with the movement and implemented evaluation of their biases and practices around equity, the countermovement for "all lives matter" and the heightened resistance to critical race theory was widely accepted in religious spaces, especially white evangelicalism. This DEI indicator therefore supports my argument that secular NGOs have isomorphic tendencies towards the corporate institution, while religious NGOs may have resisted that isomorphic pull because of their religious ties.

Finally, two of the religious organizations included statements of faith beyond their values section. The two, Samaritan’s Purse and Christian Aid Ministries, are the same whose leadership had minimal or no presence on LinkedIn. These statements of faith, also called doctrinal statements or professions of faith in other traditions, are used by religious bodies to position their theology within the larger faith belief system. These two organizations having their own statements strengthens the argument that they display isomorphic qualities to their faith institutions.

Table 11: Measurement of organizations’ website inclusions

Organization	Fundraising Page	Financials	Strategy	DEI	Statement of Faith
Good 360		✓			
International Rescue Committee	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Americares Foundation	✓	✓			
Save the Children Federation	✓	✓	✓	✓	
United States Fund for UNICEF	✓	✓		✓	
Family Health International		✓	✓	✓	
Plan International	✓	✓	✓		
Medecins Sans Frontiers USA (Doctors without Borders)	✓	✓		✓	
World Central Kitchen		✓			
America for Bulgaria Foundation		✓			
Samaritans Purse	✓	✓			✓
Catholic Medical Mission Board	✓	✓			
American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee	✓	✓			
Matthew 25 Ministries		✓			
Church World Service		✓			
Christian Aid Ministries		✓			✓
HIAS		✓			
Islamic Relief USA	✓	✓	✓		
World Relief		✓			
Adventist Development and Relief Agency		✓			

Affiliation

I then searched for how organizations defined themselves within the NGO space, and found three distinct types: affiliation with humanitarianism, affiliation with a religion, and association with the type of work or service provided. Four secular and one religious organization called themselves development and/or humanitarian organizations. The religious one, Christian Aid Ministries, does have their religious affiliation in their title though. Seven of the other religious organizations state their religious affiliation, as seen below. The remaining six secular and two religious organizations do not have clauses naming themselves as X type of organization, instead using active verbiage describing the type of work they do. For example, the International Rescue Committee’s “**Who we are**” statement reads:

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) works in more than 50 countries and in 28 U.S. cities to help people affected by humanitarian crises to survive, recover and rebuild their lives.

Religious organizations differentiate between themselves and the non-faith affiliated humanitarian organizations, whether in these affiliation clauses or in their names. This differentiation likely exists for reasons like funder signaling, but also supports the argument that religious organizations align themselves with religious institutions.

Table 12: Organizations and their affiliation clauses

Organization	Affiliation Clause
Good 360	-
International Rescue Committee	-
Americares Foundation	Americares is a health-focused relief and development organization
Save the Children Federation	-
United States Fund for UNICEF	-
Family Health International	FHI 360 is a global organization
Plan International	Plan International is a development and humanitarian organisation
Medecins Sans Frontiers USA (Doctors without Borders)	-
World Central Kitchen	-
America for Bulgaria Foundation	The America for Bulgaria Foundation (ABF) is an independent, nonpartisan, and nonpolitical American grant-making foundation
Samaritans Purse	Samaritan’s Purse is a nondenominational evangelical Christian organization
Catholic Medical Mission Board	We are an international, faith-based NGO
American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee	[T]he leading global Jewish humanitarian organization
Matthew 25 Ministries	Matthew 25: Ministries is an international humanitarian aid and disaster relief organization
Church World Service	Church World Service is a faith-based organization
Christian Aid Ministries	Christian Aid Ministries was founded in 1981 as a nonprofit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization
HIAS	-
Islamic Relief USA	-
World Relief	World Relief is a global Christian humanitarian organization
Adventist Development and Relief Agency	We are the global humanitarian arm of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Motivation

Next, I analyzed how organizations described the reason why they do what they do, and the findings fit neatly across the secular/religious divide. Secular organizations described motivation as an internally driven belief, shared across the organization. Two exemplars taken from the organizations’ list of values:

“Passion driven by a personal commitment to make a positive difference.” – FHI360

“We believe that health is a human right. We must create a world where every person – everywhere – has a fair and just opportunity to live their healthiest life.” – Americares

In comparison, religious organizations attributed their motivation to external sources, either from God’s calling/command or from a central tenet/pillar within their faith. Two exemplars taken from the organizations’ list of values:

“As our teams work in crisis areas of the world, people often ask, “Why did you come?” The answer is always the same: “We have come to help you in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” – Samaritan’s Purse

“We are told 36 times in the Torah to love those who are strangers. For HIAS, welcome begins at our door and extends through our work with refugees, partners, and allies around the globe.” – HIAS

Again, religious organizations set themselves apart. Both secular and religious organizations work towards goals outside of themselves, but secular organizations position their purpose in doing so as an acknowledgement of basic human rights, whereas religious organizations frame their purpose as servicing a being beyond humanity.

Provisions & Service

I found that language used to describe what and how services are provided also varied a bit between secular and religious organizations. Regarding what services are provided, secular organizations focused on corporeal aid. They mentioned healthcare clinics and medication, food and meals, emergency financial aid, educational resources, and shelter. Religious organizations also discussed the physical aid they provide, but six of the ten organizations also mention mental and spiritual wellbeing of aid recipients. Two of those six also distribute religious materials like bibles and child activities. Two exemplars:

“Beyond physical change, we focus on driving mental, social, and spiritual transformation.” – World Relief

“We are an effective means of reaching hurting people in countries around the world with food, medicine, and other assistance in the Name of Jesus Christ. This, in turn, earns us a

hearing for the Gospel, the Good News of eternal life through Jesus Christ.” –
Samaritan’s Purse

There was also notable variation in the language used to describe how aid was given or distributed. A small set of words were common across all organizations like help, support, serve and provide. But beyond those, secular organizations were more likely to use instrumental action verbs, whereas religious organizations more often used supportive action verbs. Secular verbs on the one hand included: build, restore, save, mobilize, tackle, advocate, enable and deliver. They, the organization’s staff and partners were the subject and manager of the actions, aligned with their internally motivated work. On the other hand, religious verbs included: lift, strengthen, provide, care, cultivate, assist, serve and follow either Jesus Christ’s call, Jewish values, or revelations of the Qur’an. Religious action language was synchronized with their external motivation, and revolved around the idea that they are helpers or instruments of God’s hand. I argue that this perceptual difference of one’s role in aid provision has an impact on organization operations, so should be taken into account when evaluating secular and religious NGOs.

There was one notable exception to this verbiage distinction in Médecins Sans Frontières’ (MSF) guiding principles. One reads “We are committed to bearing witness”. The concept of bearing witness is a key tenet in Judaism and Christianity, and one of the five pillars in Islam.

Example texts:

- “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Deuteronomy 5:20, ESV, Torah & Bible)
- “For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one” (1 John 5:7, NKJV, Bible)
- “Allah Himself bears witness that there is no God but He” (3:1, A. Maududi, Tafhim commentary, Qur’an)

MSF was clearer in their organization description than any of the other secular organizations that they operated first and foremost as doctors, with no political, ideological or economic ties to governments or biased systems. In theorizing why MSF would use a religiously laden term, I suggest their choice of language may intend to draw on the sanctity of life that is core in many religious traditions.

Aid Recipients

In line with services verbiage differences, secular and religious organizations talk about their aid recipients differently too. Three of the religious organization—Christian Aid Ministries (Anabaptist Christian), HIAS (Jewish) and AJJDC (Jewish)—put most of their efforts into and resources towards helping individuals, families and communities within their faith sect. All other organizations, secular and religious, do not verbally differentiate in that way:

“Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) offers medical humanitarian assistance to people based solely on need, irrespective of race, religion, gender, or political affiliation.” – MSF

“Islamic Relief USA provides relief and development in a dignified manner regardless of gender, race, or religion” – Islamic Relief USA

Despite no variance in accessibility of aid, the language with which secular and religious organizations describe their served communities does differ. Secular organizations talk about aid recipients as survivors of systemic or environmental issues, as people who experience crises. Recipients’ lives are “affected by”, “shattered by”, “wracked with” and “upended by” adversity or natural disasters. This language reflects the secular organization’s concepts of basic human rights and global togetherness.

In comparison, religious organizations use a combination of benevolent paternalistic and sanctimonious language to describe the communities they serve. Aid recipients are “crisis victims”, “in need”, the “least of these”, “lost and dying”, and “poor and vulnerable”. This language reflects the religious tendency to view oneself as separate and apart from people outside one’s faith community. Extrapolating this idea to institutionalism, I posit that religious organizations’ belief in their being distinct from non-believers would manifest in isomorphic movement towards religious institutions rather than corporate ones.

Accountability and Positioning

There were no distinguishable patterns in how accountability was discussed on organizations’ sites. In most cases, accountability was mentioned alongside other business principles like transparency and efficiency. Like the universality of financial statements, all organizations used corporate accountability and impact measurement language in order to ensure readers of their legitimacy as a donor organization. Most organizations also referenced specific

ratings and awards they had received from a plethora of charity watchdog agencies that evaluate secular and religious organizations. To my knowledge, there are no charity watchdogs that solely evaluate religious organizations, so corporate institutional isomorphism is especially present when there are no religious alternatives.

An extension of accountability, I added positionality as a category during my content review because I noticed repetitive usage of exceptionality language on secular organizations' website. The language was used in non-accountability sections, often in solicitation or reporting of historical impact narratives. Three of the ten secular organizations compared themselves to their peer organizations using competitive language:

- "Good360 is the industry authority" – Good360
- "We provide unparalleled leverage for donors' philanthropic dollars" – Americares
- "UNICEF has helped save and meaningfully improve more children's lives than any other humanitarian organization" – United States Fund for UNICEF

At the same time these three, along with every other organization in the sample set, highlighted partnership with other organizations, stakeholders and the community as central to their work. This contradictory language appeared in different sections of websites, with the competitor wording showing up alongside monetary solicitation and the partnership language showing up more in missional contexts. Secular organizations therefore appear to view their peer organizations in a competitive market context when attracting donors, but in a communal togetherness context when addressing the global issues they are fighting.

Religious organizations also had language around the importance of partnership and community, but they also used exceptionality language in some cases, comparing their collective religious organization group against secular ones:

"In many developing countries, faith-based organizations are the most highly-regarded and well-trusted institutions by individuals, communities, governments, and Ministries of Health." – Catholic Medical Mission Board

This supposition is reflected in the literature as well (Marshall, 2021), especially but not only when the served community's faith matches that of the organization. Similar to their viewing themselves differently when discussing affiliation, religious organizations separate themselves

from secular ones when talking about the community perception too, lending more support for the need to differentiate between the two groups in academic research.

Conclusion

This study examined whether there were differences between secular and religious leadership backgrounds, as well as the mission, vision and values sections of NGOs websites. This exploration was a first step in determining whether religious and secular organizations differ in significant ways in order to advocate for further study into how corporate institutional isomorphism may impact religious organizations differently than secular organizations because of their ties to religious institutions.

The literature suggests leaders become who they are through work experiences. This study showed that there are statistically significant associations between leader affiliation and both previous religious NGO and for-profit work experience, suggesting that the organizational forms that shaped current leadership are different. There was also statistical significance in the level of online presence on LinkedIn between organizations, perhaps tied to religious institutional norms of being set apart from the non-religious world. Three of the hypotheses were not supported, around level and place of education, as well as likelihood of holding previous positions within their current organization. As mentioned in why I chose to evaluate the largest ten organizations in each group, I propose that meaningful differences in those areas would arise when evaluating smaller religious vs. secular organizations that face less isomorphic pressure towards the business institution.

The content analysis showed that secular and religious organizations presented their work differed in meaningful ways dependent upon affiliation. For the religious organizations studied, their motivations were centered on faith beliefs, and their religiosity shaped their mission, service and provisions, and how they talked about aid recipients. Secular organizations were also driven by shared beliefs systems, but they were centered on human rights and dignity. Secular services and provision were predominantly corporeal oriented, and they spoke about aid recipients using survivor rather than victim language. This qualitative portion of the study also provides support for organizational response differences to institutional isomorphism pressure, as many of the differences were rooted in religious language and tradition. I speculate that smaller

organizations would show similar ties to religious institutions, dependent on their self-proclaimed proximity to a faith tradition.

This study is not without limitations. Below, I identified four areas of limitation along with discussion of their potential impact on this paper's findings.

1. Leaders' religious affiliation may not match the organization's affiliation, which could weaken the "becoming" leader argument. It is wholly possible that secular organization leaders hold individual religious beliefs that are not accounted for in this study, so would have been influenced by similar religious institutional norms in their personal lives that religious NGO leaders participate in their professional ones. Similarly, it is possible that religious organization leaders do not hold religious beliefs or hold different ones from the one they head, so have been shaped by no or different religious institutional norms than the one their organization is shaped by. That being said, of the 107 secular leaders with complete LinkedIn profiles, only three had worked at a religious NGO previously; and of the 21 religious leaders that had worked at religious NGOs previously, only three of them worked at another faith-affiliated organization. All three of those people are currently leaders at the Jewish HIAS and had previously worked at Christian organizations.
2. This paper treats the secular vs. religious affiliation of an organization as binary. As mentioned earlier in the piece, each religious organization studied would be labelled faith-centered or faith-affiliated per Frame's typology. Taken further though, Heist and Cnaan discuss in their piece how a leader named Peter Howard at the G20 Interfaith Summit Meeting 2015 defined six criteria that should be met for an organization to truly be considered faith-based (2016). While these nuanced differentiators are important in certain contexts, I do not believe they take away from the findings in this paper. Rather, they may add depth to future larger studies as moderating or mediating variables.
3. Because this study only looks at the ten largest secular and religious organizations, these findings may not be generalizable to the larger NGO population. I speculate that the findings of difference will scale with a larger sample size, but that may not be the case.
4. This study looks at the largest ten religious organizations in the US, which are all Abrahamic religions—defined as the three major monotheistic religions Judaism, Islam and Christianity (Catholic and Protestant) that share connectivity to the historical figure Abraham and the God he worshipped. The other religions included in the US tax codes

(Buddhism, Hinduism, and other) are not represented in this sample, but they represent such a smaller percentage of the total religious NGO revenue that it is unlikely they would affect the findings presented.

Future Research

This study illustrated that there are differences between work experience backgrounds of religious and secular leaders within the largest U.S. NGOs, as well as differences in how the organizations self-conceptualize to their audiences. I postulate that the differences and will be exacerbated, i.e. anti-isomorphic, the smaller the organizations tested are. A future study that analyzes a larger group of organizations of different sizes would lend more support to my theory that institutional isomorphism applied to professionalization of NGO leadership should account for for-profit, NGO, and religious institutions influencing religious organizations.

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Appendix

Table 2:

***Bolded and underlined text added by author to highlight religious affiliation**

Organization Name	Mission Statement
Good 360	Good360’s mission is to close the need gap. As the global leader in product philanthropy and purposeful giving, we partner with some of the world’s largest corporations to source essential goods and distribute them through our network of diverse nonprofits, supporting people in need to open opportunity for all.
International Rescue Committee	The mission of the IRC is to help people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster, including the climate crisis, to survive, recover and gain control over their future.
Americares Foundation	Americares saves lives and improves health for people affected by poverty or disaster so they can reach their full potential. Health is both essential and a human right.
Save the Children Federation	The vision of Save the Children is a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development, and participation. Its mission is to inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children and to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives.
United States Fund for UNICEF	UNICEF USA's mission is to relentlessly pursue a more equitable world for every child.
Family Health International	FHI 360 advances equity, health and well-being through data-driven, locally led solutions — so that humanity thrives. Innovation to meet the evolving needs of our beneficiaries, funders and partners. Mutual respect for diversity and cultural differences.

<p>Plan International</p>	<p>We strive for a just world that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We engage people and partners to: Empower children, young people and communities to make vital changes that tackle the root causes of discrimination against girls, exclusion and vulnerability.</p>
<p>Medecins Sans Frontiers USA (Doctors without Borders)</p>	<p>Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) offers medical humanitarian assistance to people based solely on need, irrespective of race, religion, gender, or political affiliation...Above all, MSF's goal is to do no harm. We're committed to providing the highest quality medical care possible—no matter where we're working—and to acting in our patients' best interests, respecting their rights to dignity, confidentiality, informed consent, and to make their own decisions.</p>
<p>World Central Kitchen</p>	<p>World Central Kitchen (WCK) is first to the frontlines, providing meals in response to humanitarian, climate, and community crises. Applying our model of quick action, leveraging local resources, and adapting in real time, WCK has served hundreds of millions of nourishing meals around the world.</p>
<p>America for Bulgaria Foundation</p>	<p>The mission of the American Foundation for Bulgaria is to support, to encourage and to contribute to the excellent results in education, natural and humanitarian sciences, culture and arts by providing annual scholarships, funding projects and supporting different causes.</p>

<p>Samaritans Purse</p>	<p>Samaritan’s Purse is a <u>nondenominational evangelical Christian organization</u> providing <u>spiritual</u> and physical aid to hurting people around the world. Since 1970, Samaritan’s Purse has helped meet needs of people who are victims of war, poverty, natural disasters, disease, and famine with the <u>purpose of sharing God’s love through His Son, Jesus Christ.</u> <u>The organization serves the Church worldwide to promote the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.</u></p>
<p>Catholic Medical Mission Board</p>	<p><u>Inspired by the example of Jesus,</u> CMMB works in partnership globally to deliver locally sustainable, quality health solutions to women, children, and their communities.</p>
<p>American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee</p>	<p>As the leading global <u>Jewish humanitarian organization,</u> we rescue Jews in danger, provide aid to vulnerable Jews, develop innovative solutions to Israel’s most complex social challenges, <u>cultivate a Jewish future, and lead the Jewish community’s response</u> to global crises like natural disasters, public health emergencies, and more...A century later, our mission remains the same: <u>putting Jewish values into action</u> when the world needs it most.</p>
<p>Matthew 25 Ministries</p>	<p>The mission of <u>Matthew 25: Ministries is to fulfill Matthew 25:34-40 of the New Testament</u> by providing nutritional food to the hungry, clean water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, affordable shelter to the homeless, medical care to the ill, and humanitarian supplies to those in need. Additionally, Matthew 25: Ministries is committed to <u>fulfilling Matthew 25:40</u> by educating the public on the conditions and needs of the “least of these” and by providing resources for action.</p>

Church World Service	Church World Service is a Church World Service is <u>a faith-based organization</u> transforming communities around the globe through just and sustainable responses to hunger, poverty, displacement and disaster.
Christian Aid Ministries	CAM strives to be a trustworthy and efficient channel for <u>Amish, Mennonite, and other conservative Anabaptist groups and individuals to minister to physical and spiritual needs</u> around the world. This is in response to the command, <u>“... do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10)</u> . Our main goals in providing aid: Help and encourage <u>God’s people</u> Help <u>bring the Gospel</u> to a lost and dying world
HIAS	Drawing on our <u>Jewish values</u> and history, HIAS provides vital services to refugees and asylum seekers around the world and advocates for their fundamental rights so they can rebuild their lives.
Islamic Relief USA	Islamic Relief USA provides relief and development in a dignified manner regardless of gender, race, or religion, and works to empower individuals in their communities and give them a voice in the world. Values: These traits express the belief and define the culture of the organization. We remain guided by the timeless values and teachings provided by the <u>revelations contained within the Qur’an and prophetic example.</u>

World Relief	World Relief is a global <u>Christian humanitarian</u> organization whose mission is to <u>empower the local church</u> to serve the most vulnerable.
Adventist Development and Relief Agency	Justice. Compassion. Love. To serve humanity so all may live as <u>God intended.</u>