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Entrepreneurship & Regional Development

An International Journal

ISSN: 0898-5626 (Print) 1464-5114 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/tepn20

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To cite this article: Ashenafi Biru, Andrea Carlo Sottini & Benedetto Cannatelli (02 Feb 2026): Venturing beyond sacred grounds: managing multiple identities in religious entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurship & Regional Development, DOI: 10.1080/08985626.2026.2623140

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2026.2623140

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ENTREPRENEURSHIP & REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT
https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2026.2623140

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Venturing beyond sacred grounds: managing multiple identities in religious entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how religious organizations (ROs) manage identity multiplicity and navigate resulting identity tensions as they engage in social service and commercial roles alongside evangelism. We study Catholic missionary organizations in Uganda to explore how multiple role expectations are articulated and managed when sacred identity claims are treated as enduring and authoritative. Building on identity elasticity theory and a social constructionist view of organizational identity, we develop an account of how ROs constitute entrepreneurial roles through sacred meanings in practice. We identify infusion-based identity elasticity as an identity work mechanism through which ROs enact multiple identity roles, while maintaining an enduring sacred core identity. We also find that ROs employ mission-centric framing, balancing, and sacralizing strategies to infuse social and business roles with religious meanings, values, and moral codes, shifting identity work from integrating identity domains to enacting sacredness in practice. The study contributes to organizational religious entrepreneurship and identity elasticity research by clarifying how ROs enact entrepreneurial activities through sacred meanings under theological and institutional constraint, and it offers insight for research on multiple organizational identities by specifying how identity multiplicity is navigated through the enactment of multiple identity roles.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 November 2024
Accepted 23 January 2026

KEYWORDS
Religious entrepreneurship; religious organizations; infusion-based identity elasticity; multiple organizational identities; identity tension management

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS
SDG 10: Reduced inequalities

Introduction

A growing body of research on the 'theological turn' in entrepreneurship emphasizes the importance of integrating religious meanings and identity claims within entrepreneurship research (B. R. Smith, McMullen, and Cardon 2021; B. R. Smith et al. 2019). This stream of literature recognizes religious identity as constituted through meaning-making processes that guide actions and behaviours in entrepreneurship (B. Smith, Gümüsay, and Townsend 2023). While the predominant focus has been on individual and macro-level analyses, there is an emerging scholarship on entrepreneurship in religious organizations (ROs), formal institutions rooted in faith traditions that pursue sacred missions (Dubard Barbosa and Smith 2024; Gümüsay 2020; van Werven 2024). Given their significance in social life, ROs have long operated as institutional anchors across spiritual, social, and economic domains (Tracey 2012). With shifting socio-economic conditions, their engagement in entrepreneurial initiatives has increased to meet both spiritual and material needs and generate financial

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2026.2623140.

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resources (Mudau and Tshifhumulo 2024; C. Smith 2017; van Werven 2024). This expansion beyond their core spiritual role requires them to enact multiple and often competing role expectations (spiritual, social, and commercial), creating identity multiplicity (Fleischmann, Leszczensky, and Pink 2019; Pratt and Foreman 2000; Ramarajan 2014). Yet, we have a limited understanding of the way ROs manage competing expectations of multiple role identities when they engage in entrepreneurship.

Studies often focus on dual identities, balancing social and commercial logics, while empirical research on managing multiple identities remains limited (Battilana, Besharov, and Mitzinneck 2017; Ramarajan 2014; B. R. Smith et al. 2022). While ROs in entrepreneurship operate in environments that require them to adapt (van Werven 2024), they are typically understood through their commitment a sacred identity characterized as central, distinctive, and enduring (Albert and Whetten 1985; Sheep and Foreman 2012). Unlike secular organizations, ROs' identity is anchored in a 'divine' source rooted in theological doctrine and treated as immutable (Hinings and Bryman 1974; Tracey 2012). This creates a critical identity tension between the need for dynamic adaptation to growing community expectations for social and economic services, and the imperative to sustain the legitimacy of sacred meanings amid of expanding organizational activities.

Research on identity elasticity has theorized that organizational leaders and members can manage socially constructed tensions by stretching identity claims while simultaneously holding them together (Kreiner et al. 2015). Thus, even organizations whose identities are commonly portrayed as relatively rigid, such as ROs, can engage in identity work through which multiple identity claims are constructed and narrated as simultaneously flexible and coherent. While identity elasticity offers a powerful lens for understanding organizational identity work in ROs (Kreiner et al. 2015), there is a lack of adequate empirical research on how ROs invoke and stretch the centrality, distinctiveness, and endurance of identity claims when they engage in entrepreneurial activities spanning spiritual, social, and commercial roles. To address this important research gap, we ask the following research question: *How do RO leaders manage multiple identity role tensions when pursuing entrepreneurship?*

To address this question, we conduct an inductive qualitative study of Catholic Missionary Organizations in Uganda (hereafter ROs). Drawing on identity elasticity (Kreiner et al. 2015), we examine how ROs in entrepreneurship navigate evangelistic, social, and commercial role expectations. Adopting a social constructionist perspective on organizational identity (Ravasi and Schultz 2006), we conceptualize organizational-level identity work as constituted through the accounts and practices of RO leaders, and use these insights to elaborate a theory on the mechanisms through which ROs manage tensions arising from competing role expectations (Fisher and Aguinis 2017).

Our study makes several contributions to religious entrepreneurship. First, we identify infusion-based identity elasticity as a distinct form of organizational identity work through which ROs conduct social and business entrepreneurial initiatives as sacred practices. Building on identity elasticity theory (Kreiner et al. 2015), we show how ROs navigating multiple and often competing role expectations employ mission-centric framing, balancing, and sacralizing strategies to carry out entrepreneurial activities in explicitly religious ways. While prior research emphasizes integration or compartmentalization as mechanisms for managing multiple roles (Pratt and Foreman 2000), our findings show that ROs constitute social and business entrepreneurship through sacred meanings, values, and moral codes, shifting identity work from integrating identity domains to enacting sacredness in practice. Second, we contribute to the growing theological turn in entrepreneurship research (B. Smith, Gümüsay, and Townsend 2023; B. R. Smith, McMullen, and Cardon 2021) by moving beyond individual-level motivations to explain how religious entrepreneurship is constituted at the organizational level through identity work, showing how ROs frame, justify, and enact entrepreneurial roles as an expression of sacred commitments rather than as value-compatible economic activity. Third, we contribute to research on multiple organizational identities (Johnson and Jian 2017; Pratt and Foreman 2000) by showing how ROs whose sacred identity claims are represented as non-negotiable navigate identity multiplicity under doctrinal authority and

hierarchical accountability. In this context, our study highlights that identity multiplicity is managed in practice through an outward projection of sacred meaning into other roles of ROs, rather than through strategies that restructure and change the organizational identity domains (Pratt and Foreman 2000). Finally, by examining ROs in Uganda, we contribute to research on entrepreneurship in Africa by theorizing how socio-economic scarcity and high demand for social provision shape the enactment of religious entrepreneurship and identity work in organizational contexts (B. R. Smith et al. 2022).

Theoretical background

Identity in religious organizations

Organizational identity has commonly been defined as characteristics that members regard as central, enduring, and distinctive (Albert and Whetten 1985). While this formulation has shaped much of the identity literature, it has also generated sustained debate regarding the ontological status of identity. In particular, scholars distinguish between a social actor perspective, which treats identity as a relatively stable set of claims of 'sense giving' claims articulated to stakeholders (Whetten and Mackey 2002), and a social constructionist perspective, which conceptualizes identity as an ongoing process of 'sensemaking' and negotiation (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000; Kreiner et al. 2015; Ravasi and Schultz 2006). Our study builds on social constructionist view by conceptualizing organizational identity in ROs as a set of identity claims that are continuously articulated, contested, and reinterpreted through discursive and practical activities (Kreiner et al. 2015). From this perspective, the tripartite dimensions of centrality, distinctiveness, and endurance are not predefined properties of identity, but claims invoked as organizational actors make sense of who they are and what they do in relation to changing activities and expectations (Gioia and Patvardhan 2012; Ravasi and Schultz 2006).

Identity in the context of ROs exemplifies a view of identity as a fluid and interpretive character (Kreiner et al. 2015; B. R. Smith et al. 2022). Although ROs are often portrayed as anchored in enduring theological commitments, prior research shows that religious identity is enacted through ongoing interpretation of what faith-based commitments mean in practice, especially as ROs engage in social and economic initiatives (van Werven 2024). Such engagement is often driven by expanding community expectations, resource constraints, and the need to sustain religious mission in contexts characterized by socio-economic scarcity (Barentsen 2015; van Werven 2024). As a result, social service provision and entrepreneurial initiatives become sites where religious commitments are interpreted and enacted, rather than departures from a spiritual mission (Herzog et al. 2020). In that vein, rather than reflecting a stable essence, identity roles in ROs are performed through initiatives and practices that allow them to maintain religious meaning relevant in changing environments (Barentsen 2015). Thus, this study focuses on how identity claims in ROs are articulated and rendered workable in practice, rather than on the preservation or transformation of institutionalized identity claims over time. This focus is particularly important for understanding how ROs navigate identity tensions when engaging in entrepreneurship, where religious, social, and commercial role expectations coexist and must be continuously interpreted under conditions of theological and institutional constraint (Herzog et al. 2020; Johnson and Jian 2017; Tracey 2012).

Identity multiplicity of religious organizations in entrepreneurship

Organizational identities are constructed through roles enacted in institutional and social environments, with centrality, endurance, and distinctiveness articulated as identity claims that inform how organizations answer 'Who are we?' (Albert and Whetten 1985). When organizations engage in three or more identity roles, they encounter identity multiplicity (Fleischmann, Leszczensky, and Pink 2019; Ramarajan 2014), raising critical questions about how competing role expectations generate identity

tensions (B. R. Smith et al. 2022). ROs, particularly those operating in developing contexts, frequently engage in multiple entrepreneurial roles that extend beyond roles treated as spiritually central as they respond to socio-economic demands within their communities (Barentsen 2015; van Werven 2024). In contexts characterized by poverty, ROs are often unable to limit their activities to evangelistic roles alone. van Werven (2024), for example, shows that socio-economic hardship leads missionary organizations to engage in education, healthcare, and livelihood support, which are framed as integral expressions of their religious mission. Similarly, C. Smith (2017) notes that ROs frequently function as de facto development agents, delivering essential services while sacralizing humanitarian space (Ndzovu 2020). These social engagements, however, raise concerns about financial sustainability, prompting ROs to pursue income-generating entrepreneurial activities that draw on religious values and moral legitimacy (Dana 2009; van Werven 2024).

Engagement in social and business entrepreneurship introduces a distinctive form of identity multiplicity for ROs. Central religious identity claims, such as theological doctrines and evangelistic missions, are often represented as non-negotiable and divinely mandated within organizational discourse rather than as managerial choices (Hinings and Bryman 1974). Unlike secular organizational leaders who may redefine organizational purpose, local RO leaders operate under doctrinal authority and hierarchical accountability, limiting their discretion in articulating organizational identity claims (Johnson and Jian 2017; Tracey 2012). Claims of endurance, which portray religious identity as continuous across generations, position leaders and members as stewards of faith traditions, governance structures, and symbolic practices that sustain religious meaning over time (Tracey 2012).

At the same time, engagement in social and commercial activities introduces tensions, as new practices may challenge representations of identity as unchanging and enduring. Claims of distinctiveness expressed through sacred symbols, rituals, and codes of conduct (Hinings and Raynard 2014) can become ambiguous when ROs engage in activities that resemble those of secular charities or businesses. Although identity multiplicity may require rearticulation of identity claims to differentiate ROs from secular organizations, local leaders often lack the authority to formally reposition these claims, resulting in ongoing ambiguity and identity tensions (Johnson and Jian 2017; Nelson 2021). Thus, identity multiplicity in ROs reflects the coexistence of religious, social, and commercial role expectations under conditions of doctrinal constraint and limited managerial discretion. Given these constraints, it is therefore critical to understand the organizational identity work through which ROs articulate, justify, and adapt workable multiple identity role claims when engaging in entrepreneurship.

Organizational identity work and elasticity in religious organizations

Organizational identity work comprises the ongoing discursive and practical activities in which members justify, negotiate and reinterpret tensions regarding 'who we are' (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Kreiner et al. 2015). While this line of research is well-established, empirical research on managing multiple identities remains limited (Battilana, Besharov, and Mitzinneck 2017; Ramarajan 2014), and its application in religious contexts is particularly scant (B. R. Smith et al. 2022). Prior research has identified several approaches through which organizations address identity multiplicity, including integration, aggregation, and compartmentalization (Pratt and Foreman 2000). These approaches, however, implicitly assume a degree of managerial discretion to redefine or reorganize identity claims (Pratt and Foreman 2000). Such assumption is problematic in ROs context, where local leaders operate under doctrinal authority and hierarchical accountability that constrain their ability to formally reposition organizational identity (Johnson and Jian 2017; Tracey 2012). Under such conditions, managing identity multiplicity cannot rely on structural reconfiguration or identity change.

Against this backdrop, the concept of identity elasticity, introduced by Kreiner et al. (2015), offers a useful lens for understanding how ROs engage in identity work under conditions of constraint.

Kreiner et al. (2015) show that identity elasticity directs attention to how organizational actors interpret and stretch identity claims along the dimensions of centrality, endurance, and distinctiveness, while simultaneously holding it together. Rather than treating identity as a stable core that must be preserved, this perspective emphasizes how claims about what is considered essential, continuous, or distinctive are rearticulated in practice as organizations engage in new activities. It reflects the capacity of organizational members to reframe what is treated as essential or negotiable (centrality), what is invoked as continuous or open to reinterpretation (endurance), and what is emphasized as distinctive or shared (distinctiveness) when responding to shifting expectations (Kreiner et al. 2015; Waldner, Schrage, and Rasche 2025).

For ROs in entrepreneurship, identity elasticity is particularly salient because religious, social, and commercial role expectations coexist and must be addressed simultaneously. While sacred commitments are often represented as non-negotiable within organizational discourse, engagement in social service provision and entrepreneurial activity requires ongoing interpretive work to extend religious meaning into new domains of practice (Johnson and Jian 2017; Ndzovu 2020). Identity elasticity thus captures how organizational actors navigate identity multiplicity not by altering doctrinal foundations, but by rearticulating how religious identity role claims are expressed, justified, and enacted across diverse organizational activities. By shifting analytical focus away from identity integration or structural hybridity, identity elasticity foregrounds the organizational identity work through which multiple role expectations are managed in practice. We position our research within this emerging conversation to examine the specific mechanisms through which RO leaders, operating under significant theological and institutional constraints, manage and sustain multiple identity roles in pursuing entrepreneurial initiatives.

Research methods

We conducted in-depth qualitative, inductive research on how ROs manage the tensions of identity multiplicity that arise when they pursue social and commercial entrepreneurial activities alongside their sacred missions. A qualitative approach is appropriate for exploratory research in understudied contexts such as Uganda (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007), and it allows us to examine the multiple dimensions of religious identity and capture RO leaders' experience of managing multiple and often competing role expectations. To address our research question, we investigated a specific sample of local ROs as branches of international religious orders, which, besides their evangelization and social ministry activities, also run businesses, ranging from radio networks to car parking. We believe that this represented an extreme and appropriate case to investigate the multiple roles ROs manage. The data collection has been conducted in the field in three rounds, interviewing 29 leaders of 15 ROs.

Research setting

This research has been built from previous field visits in which two of the authors realized that ROs in Uganda were experiencing a decrease in donations coming from Western countries, threatening their capacity to sustain their evangelization mission. While entrepreneurship has historical roots in the Catholic church, a growing need for religious orders in developing countries, including Uganda, to establish business organizations to sustain their mission has become noticeable due to the decrease of donations from Western countries (Vahidi Mehrjardi 2022).

We chose Uganda for its unique religious and socio-economic context. Catholicism, the predominant religion, has a long history in the Country, where early missionaries emphasized education and health services, integral to Catholic missions worldwide. Uganda's ROs, including the Association of Religious in Uganda (ARU) founded in 1957, count 113 registered institutes with over 8000 individual members.[1] From a socio-economic standpoint, Uganda's challenging business environment includes weak formal institutional support, a predominance of informal enterprises, and a high business failure rate. Although poverty has decreased, around 40% of the population lives below the

poverty line, with many residing in slums without basic services.[2] This economic backdrop further complicates the pursuit of entrepreneurship by ROs.

Case selection

We selected ROs as local branches of wider institutional orders and been established in Uganda around the beginning and middle of the 20th century. We selected this setting for some important theoretical reasons. First, ROs respond to the criteria of having low autonomy and control over their activities and mission (Pratt and Foreman 2000). Indeed, these organizations are run by small local units within a pre-ordered hierarchical structure, leaving little margin of action. They are imprinted by *charisma* from the Founder, which determines not only the mission (e.g. education) but also the way of living (e.g. in poverty with unprivileged people), and evangelizing. Thus, these organizations are rooted in an immutable set of norms, values, and beliefs. Second, they have three identity role expectations, such as evangelization, pursuing social ministry, and financial self-independence, that are strongly interrelated and required to be managed within a limited discretionary autonomy. Moreover, since traditional funding sources have declined – subsidies to African ROs from European dioceses fell by 37% from 2000 to 2020 (Vatican Financial Reports, 2021) – ROs must address their financial needs through various venture activities such as farms, restaurants, and hotels to sustain their core evangelistic mission as well as fulfill social role expectations.

From an empirical standpoint, we carefully selected a sample of organizations that could respond to the criteria to address our research question. First, we focused on ROs operating for at least five years. This ensured they had encountered and addressed identity tensions from maintaining religious, social, and business entrepreneurial initiatives over time. By focusing on these organizations, we gathered in-depth empirical evidence on how identity multiplicity is managed as an ongoing process, capturing patterns of adaptation, reinforcement, and negotiation through sustained practice. Second, we purposely included a large and differentiated spectrum of business sectors, from those that are more salient for religious orders, such as private schools, to radio, television, hostel, and car parking, to have an overview of the relationships between different businesses and other identities.

Data collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 29 participants from 15 ROs (Table 1). Our informants held various leadership positions within the ROs,[3] and interviews lasted around 40–50 minutes and were conducted in three data collection rounds. We started to list informants from a personal network of two of the authors who previously worked with different ROs in Uganda. Further contacts have been granted by the Association of Religious in Uganda and shared by other informants, constructing the sample through a snowballing approach. Along with this process, we contacted around 25 organizations, and only 16 decided to participate, but 15 became part of the final sample.

Our theoretical focus and research question evolved across three data collection rounds as the phenomenon and its theoretical relevance became clearer. In the first round, we explored how, when, and why ROs began business activities and how these activities relate to their core mission of evangelization and their social ministry. This initial data revealed the roles related to their sacred identity (evangelization, social, and business), leading us to use organizational identity as our main framework (Corley and Gioia 2004; Kreiner et al. 2015). In the second round, we expanded our sample to further focus on the tensions that emerged within and across these roles and the practices ROs use to manage them. This new data deepened our understanding of how ROs managed multiple roles around the sacred identity. Specifically, these data led us to identify the three constitutive elements of the sacred identity: centrality, endurance, and distinctiveness. Taken together, between the first and second rounds we conducted 21 interviews with 15 ROs and participants ranged from directors,

Table 1. Background information of informants in the study.

Org. Code	Participants	Gender	Role	Business Type	Years in Business	No. Employees
A	#1	Woman	Director	Education	8	5–7
A	#2	Man	Head of school	Education	8	5–7
B	#3	Woman	Director	Consulting	62	6–8
B	#10	Woman	Director	Consulting	62	6–8
C	#4	Woman	Director	Agriculture	6	5–7
D	#5	Man	Director	Media & Promotion	24	6–8
D	#9	Man	Head of programmes	Media & Promotion	24	6–8
D	#12	Man	Director	Media & Promotion	24	6–8
E	#6	Woman	Director	Education	28	5–7
F	#7	Woman	Director	Education	27	5–7
G	#8	Woman	Coordinator	Media (Magazine)	69	3–5
G	#11	Woman	Coordinator	Media (Magazine)	69	3–5
H	#13	Woman	Project manager	Agriculture	15 approx	8–10
H	#27	Man	Director	Agriculture	15 approx	8–10
I	#14	Man	Director	Café & Restaurant	5	3–5
I	#22	Man	Director	Café & Restaurant	5	3–5
L	#15	Man	Director	Café & Restaurant	15 approx	3–5
L	#23	Man	Director	Café & Restaurant	15 approx	3–5
L	#25	Man	Manager	Café & Restaurant	15 approx	3–5
M	#16	Man	Director	Agriculture and Car parking	18	8–10
M	#21	Man	Director	Agriculture and Car parking	18	8–10
M	#20	Man	Director	Agriculture and Car parking	18	8–10
N	#17	Woman	Director	Backery	20 approx	8–10
O	#18	Man	Director	Transportation services	62	6–8
O	#24	Man	Director	Transportation services	62	6–8
P	#19	Woman	Director	Agriculture	15 approx	8–10
P	#28	Man	Director	Agriculture	15 approx	8–10
Q	#26	Man	Director	Construction	15 approx	6–8
Q	#29	Man	Manager	Construction	15 approx	6–8

project coordinators to managers. In the third round, we added 8 interviews with participants from 6 of the 15 ROs interviewed in the first and second rounds. We went back to those organizations that provided more holistic data related to the tensions and strategies implemented by ROs. The aim was to consolidate our evidence about relationships between roles and strategies to cope with the tensions that emerged, reaching data saturation.

During the field visits, the authors had the opportunity to collect observations on their activities, not only religious, but also social and business activities. The deep and first-person experience allowed us not only to see but also to 'feel' some of the religious principles visible in doing business (Pratt, Sonenshein, and Feldman 2022). For instance, the building of the guest houses and restaurants were often painted with religious teachings as well as schools with encouraging 'moto' for local communities. These observations helped us not only to triangulate data with semi-structured interviews but also to get more insights into the facilities of these organizations, often geographically embedded in local communities, their customers, and their relationships with religious workers. Third, we collected secondary data from newspaper, reports, and essay of Catholic organizations in the country. This source has been particularly helpful to have a broad understanding of Catholic mission in the country, their evolutions, and scope of their businesses.

Data analysis

We conducted our data analysis following a rigorous analytical procedure presented by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013). First, by reading carefully the interviews, we assigned preliminary codes to the concepts that emerged from the evidence (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The purpose of this phase was to reach meaning condensation out of a large amount of collected evidence. Those similar codes gradually collapsed into first-order codes, being careful to

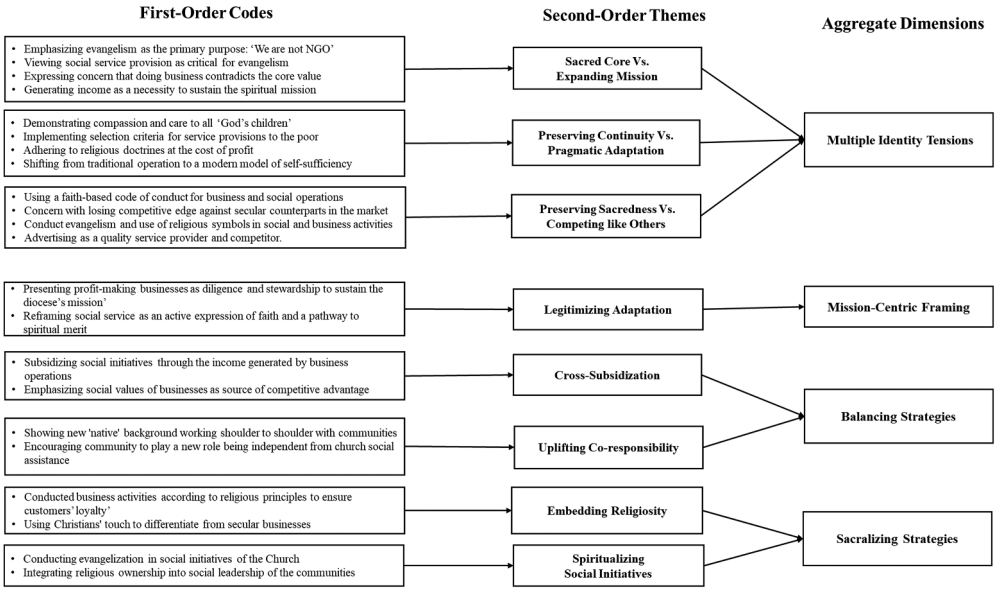

Figure 1. Data structure.

reflect the meanings of the interviews (Gephart 2004). Two authors conducted this analysis separately, while a third author validated them. We selected those codes that potentially addressed our research questions. As a result, we identified sixteen first-order concepts. According to this procedure of analysis, a second step is required to connect first-order codes into theoretical categories referred to our theory. This required several processes of going back and forth between the data and theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We carefully read different literature to identify and connect empirical observations to existing theoretical concepts. For instance, we linked the challenges in pursuing multiple and often competing identities, including evangelization, social, and business, with the literature on 'Multiple identity tensions' (e.g. B. R. Smith et al. 2022). Thus, we recognized the organizational identity work as the most appropriate and representative of our data (Kreiner et al. 2015).

Accordingly, we took conceptually similar first-order codes and abstracted them into second-order themes that were connected to the literature on organizational identity. For example, the first-order codes that suggested ROs aimed at 'Conducting business activities according to religious principles to ensure customers' loyalty' and 'Using Christians' touch to differentiate from secular businesses' have been grouped into a second-order that conceptually grouped them into 'Embedding religiosity'. This theory-driven process of empirical evidence produced eight second-order themes. Third, we moved those second-order themes with theoretically overlapping domains into three aggregate dimensions. Specifically, we identified four aggregate dimensions: one capturing the 'Multiple identity tensions' and three representing the strategic mechanisms used to manage tensions: *Mission-centric framing, Balancing strategy, and Sacralizing strategy*. Taking together these three steps, we produced a data structure as reported in Figure 1. Moreover, to support the reliability of the data, we provided evidence of the data structure for each of the 15 organizations (see the Supplementary materials).

Building on our findings, we developed a cross-sectional model illustrated in two parts to facilitate the visual presentation of our model. Respectively, the first model documents the tensions of the ROs, while the second grounded model shows the strategies implemented to address them. By doing that, we elaborated theory of identity elasticity, and addressed our research question (Pratt, Sonenshein, and Feldman 2022).

Findings

The identity tensions experienced by ROs emerge as they expand beyond their foundational mission of evangelism to provide social services and engage in commercial ventures. The consequent issues of identity multiplicity are consistent with prior research showing that role expansion amplifies identity conflicts (Pratt and Foreman 2000; B. R. Smith et al. 2022), particularly in ROs when the dominant religious identity is rigid and enduring (Sheep and Foreman 2012). In the sections that follow, we present our findings of tensions across the tripartite dimensions of identity (centrality, endurance, and distinctiveness), focusing first on how these tensions emerge and then showing the organizational identity work, that we labelled 'Infusion-based identity elasticity'. ROs employed to adapt to local expectations while striving to preserve their core religious character.

Multiple identity tensions in religious organizations

Our findings reveal that ROs pursuing social and business ventures encounter multiple interdependent tensions, wherein the tripartite dimensions of organizational identity are stretched or constricted. In ROs pursuing entrepreneurship in Uganda, tensions emerge not from competing interpretations of the same religious ideology but from the need to reconcile competing identity roles that coexist within one organizational system. We show that ROs' efforts to expand their activities beyond evangelism introduce elasticity pressures that test the malleability of the religious identity along the dimensions of what is core (centrality), continuous (endurance), and distinctive (sacred difference). Figure 2 presents our emergent model, illustrating the conceptual relationships between elasticity tensions across the tripartite dimensions of ROs' sacred identity and the identity work mechanisms used to navigate multiplicity. We now explain these tensions and mechanisms.

Sacred core vs. Expanding mission

Our data reveals the identity tension in how ROs define what lies at the core of their sacred mission. Many of our informants emphasized that evangelism remains the immutable centre of their identity. As one RO leader stated, *'We are not a profit-making organization. We are not a charity organization. And we still come out and try to evangelize and bring Jesus'* (G#11). However, they also acknowledged that providing education, healthcare, and income-generating ventures has become essential to sustaining both their ministry and community welfare. The ROs in our sample indicate that their engagement in social roles redefines evangelism as *faith in action* rather than mere preaching. One RO leader explained that:

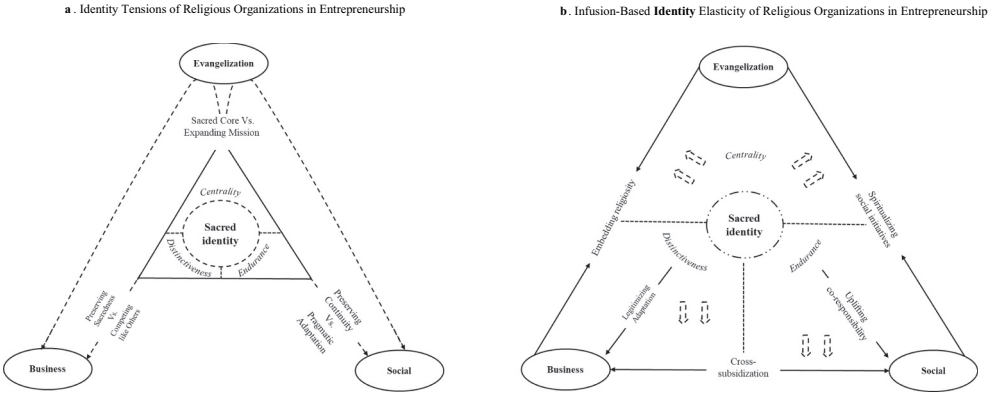

Figure 2. Grounded theoretical model: organizational identity tensions and infusion-based identity elasticity. (a) Identity tensions of religious organizations in entrepreneurship. (b) Infusion-based identity elasticity of religious organizations in entrepreneurship.

> We cannot preach a gospel to a hungry community. We need to uplift their standard of living too (Q#29)

Another participant added:

> It is the one who was able to visit the sick, the one who was able to feed the hungry, the one who was able to give the first man, who was able to earn eternal life. (I#14)

This centrality tension does not merely reflect disagreement over activities but reveals an elastic negotiation of what counts as 'sacred work'. ROs in our study view the income-generating ventures they operate, such as hotels, schools and shops, as critical to sustain their ministries amid the demand for social services provisions and financial scarcity. However, our informants indicate that some members questioned whether engagement in business activities such as hotels, shops, hospitals and schools, risks diluting the sacred nucleus of the church's mission. As one leader noted, *'If we do business for business, then the church would be out of its core value, which is serving others'* (H#27). This centrality tension reflects not a core – peripheral distinction but a process of symbolic expansion, wherein evangelism remains the theological nucleus while social and commercial roles are reframed as integral expressions of the same sacred mission.

Preserving continuity vs. pragmatic adaptation

Our findings show that ROs engage in multiple roles face elasticity concerns of how far the enduring elements of religious identity, such as faith doctrines, moral codes, and established practices, can be stretched to remain viable amid economic scarcity and expanding community expectations. The struggle is not over whether faith should endure, but how endurance is maintained when conditions of continuity have changed. Many of our informants described the moral dilemma they face in balancing fidelity to doctrinal principles with the pragmatic need to survive financially and respond to community demand. For example, some of our informants emphasize resistance to moral and symbolic compromise when business activities clash with faith-based principles.

> We are not supposed to sell alcohol, as much as we have hospitality businesses and even if we have this rent houses, we cannot rent it to these people who are against our Christianity, our norms. It will limit us from competing and making profits, but we have nothing to do because we are not supposed to do otherwise. (H#13)

At the same time, ROs face acute tension between the enduring principle of compassion and the limits of available resources. Several leaders expressed anguish over being unable to assist all in need, as one RO leader explained:

> The challenge is that many students cannot afford to pay the fees, but we know that a lack of education compromises their future. It brings a conflict in one's heart and mission because you know that Christ took care of the poor and insists, we take care of the poor. But we cannot manage to help everybody. Imagine when you have widow or poor person who wants her children to go to school and you have to insist on her to pay. It is hard. (E#6)

Such reflections highlight that ROs' endurance elasticity in contexts like Uganda involves an emotional and moral recalibration, reinterpreting what it means to uphold the faith's enduring mission under conditions of scarcity. As another leader noted,

> Gone are the days of the mission churches when everything had to be provided from somewhere else. So, there is a struggle between efficient evangelization and sustainability. Our mission is we proclaim Christ, but it requires finances, we need to sustain ourselves. (P#28)

Our findings show that the endurance elasticity tensions manifest as a pull between *continuity* (preserving sacred obligations) and *pragmatic adaptation* to remain viable and relevant.

Preserving sacredness vs. competing like others

The active engagement in multiple entrepreneurial roles threatens ROs' distinct sacred identity, which is anchored in moral authority and spiritual legitimacy. Our findings show that the elasticity

tension of organizational distinctiveness lies in navigating the extent to which ROs can maintain a recognizable *difference* from secular service provider NGOs and commercial businesses, while conducting similar activities like other market actors. RO leaders expressed frustrations at the pressure from communities and partners to behave like conventional charity organizations, a stance that challenges their self-understanding as spiritual entities. As one leader stated:

> Nowadays, it is very difficult to make people understand that the church doesn't have enough money to cover for schools and medication expenses for all the children. (M#16)

Community members often construed ROs as boundlessly compassionate rather than resource-constrained organizations, expecting leniency to be inconsistent with market practices. Another leader explained:

> We know that they [parents] first pay lay schools and then our as last, if you ask them why, they often say ''the other schools are private and very tough about payment', Indeed, there are some schools you pay the first day, otherwise you don't enter. So, they tell you, 'You know, the other ones can't give me a chance'. I said: 'So why do you think we should give you a chance?' 'Ah, you are religious, you should understand the need to help the poor'. (E#6)

At the same time, our informants indicated the internal tension that ROs are cautious about how far they can stretch their religious distinctiveness without being mistaken for commercial businesses. As one informant noted:

> We have competitors, and we are in business; we cannot compete like this. Our competitors put additives in the bread to reduce costs and make it puffier; why can't we do that? (N#17)

Our findings illustrate how identity elasticity operates at identity multiplicity, where essential roles must be conducted without overshadowing the imputed and institutionalized sacred image that makes ROs distinct from others.

Organizational identity work: infusion-based identity elasticity

Mission-centric framing

Legitimizing adaptation. Our findings show that ROs manage centrality tension in identity through a *legitimizing adaptation* mechanism as they expand their roles beyond evangelism to include social service provision and commercial activity. ROs legitimize their social and commercial roles by framing them as critical for sustaining spiritual work. Framing functions as a process where leaders strategically interpret 'who we are' according to members' and stakeholders' expectations (Kreiner et al. 2015). We find that the mission-centric framing strategy RO leaders use allows them to preserve the primacy of the sacred mission while legitimizing the social and business roles as spiritually congruent. For example, one leader explained, '*We have opened up a car parking as a way of helping the missions*' (F#7). Such framing to legitimize other organizational roles allows commercial activities to be framed as 'diligence and stewardship to sustain the mission', rather than as mission drift.

Our findings show that while evangelism remains positioned as the theological nucleus, ROs symbolically stretch its boundaries to accommodate the social and business engagements, reinterpreting these roles as expressions of *faith in action* rather than becoming a hybrid of spiritual and secular identities. Our findings indicate that RO leaders often justified entrepreneurial activities through external pressures, such as declining foreign donations, to frame adaptation as a theological necessity, without appearing to change or revise doctrinal commitments. For example, one RO leader said:

> The reduction of donations from Rome was like a wakeup call and we realized that we had to devise local means to generate our own resources so as to continue with the evangelization mission. So, we started agricultural investments, like with cattle, coffee and different crops, but we are also into hotel business and restaurants. Plus, we build houses that we rent for further income. These are interventions to generate money locally to run our interventions. (L#15)

Rather than redefining or reconstructing their religious ideology, ROs recast the sacred mission as inclusive of secular roles that are spiritually purposeful, social work as service to God and business as stewardship of divine resources. This mechanism preserves theological coherence while legitimizing adaptation, allowing ROs to stretch the meaning of 'doing God's work' without violating doctrinal boundaries.

Balancing strategies

Our data analysis shows that ROs address the tension between preserving doctrinal continuity and adapting to local realities (endurance tension) through two key mechanisms: *uplifting responsibility* and *cross-subsidization*, which we refer to as *balancing strategies*.

Uplifting responsibility

ROs in our study manage endurance tension by redistributing the responsibility for mission continuity between the Church and local communities. This strategic mechanism restructures the operational relationship from a hierarchical 'provider – beneficiary' dynamic to a collaborative 'We' identity, ensuring shared commitment to sustaining sacred mission. Our informants highlight that by *'working shoulder to shoulder with communities'* to empower local communities to take on religious responsibilities, ROs maintain continuity of values while adjusting their operational model. As one priest explained:

> We say the missionaries are no longer here with us, and I am as a native priest living with you in the parish. We tell them that I'm a priest ordained here but my parents are here with you, you know them. I'm ordained here; you've seen me work at the farm to get some income. We have a carpenter workshop at the parish, a poultry farm at the parish and they see a priest working. (M#16)

This visible involvement of community members in livelihood activities enables ROs to enact humility and solidarity, strengthening the authenticity of their enduring sacred mission. Many of our informants emphasized that they encourage a mindset of self-reliance among community members as a moral form of empowerment aligned with Christian teaching. One RO leader explained:

> One challenge is the mindset. People are still picking up to be self-reliant. We are trying to preach the gospel to encourage a mindset change so that the people can understand that need to stand on our own and support themselves" (Q#29), 'so they can cover the needs getting from their own pockets other than the relying on the handouts from the Church' another added. (H#27)

ROs also seek to uplift social responsibilities of community members through initiatives such as agricultural training and skills development, aligning spiritual responsibility with material self-sufficiency. As one informant noted:

> We gave training skills to women, especially single mothers and the youth. We teach them to earn their way of living, so that they are able to depend on their own and not depend on us. (A#1)

Our analysis shows that by involving community members and encouraging to embody religious teachings and values, ROs preserve the enduring sacred ethos ('serving the poor') while adapting their means of service to contemporary socio-economic realities.

Cross-subsidization

ROs also employ *cross-subsidization* as a balancing strategy to sustain endurance. Rather than perceiving business operations as contradictory to faith, ROs framed them as mechanisms of stewardship that ensure the endurance of their mission. For example, one of the RO leaders in our study emphasized that *'Within business, there is a window of doing charity'* (O#24). Other informants explained how income from fee-paying clients subsidized free services for those who cannot afford to pay.

> Some can afford to pay the fees, while like half of them struggle, or even more than half. So, with the money from those who can pay, we subsidize others, it's like the income we generate we use it to provide service for free for others. (E#6)

Similarly, our informants emphasized that ROs often use ethical conduct and integrity as business virtues that reinforce, rather than diluted, their religious commitments. One informant explained:

> Many businesses do things in a very unethical way. It's only when people have understood that what we are selling is actually value for money, then for sure they'll pay for what we have. (M#21)

Another RO leader added:

> Customers are loyal because of the service we offer, because we do not advertise things that our audience may not like, find contradicting, so they become loyal. (D#5)

Cross-subsidization represents a pragmatic elasticity of endurance, enabling ROs to adapt to economic practices without compromising continuity of the sacred mission and reaffirming the enduring values of charity and integrity. Therefore, our findings show that both uplifting responsibility and cross-subsidization mechanisms demonstrate how ROs in Uganda address identity continuity tensions by stabilizing their religious identity over time through adaptive practices that do not erode, but rather sustain, the enduring essence of their sacred mission.

Sacralizing strategies

We find that ROs enact identity work mechanisms such as *embedding religiosity* and *spiritualizing social initiatives*, which we label as *sacralizing strategies*, allowing them to preserve their distinct sacred identity while expanding functionally into commercial and social domains.

Embedding religiosity

Our findings show that ROs safeguard their sacred distinctiveness by embedding religious symbols, values, and practices into business operations, ensuring that commercial ventures are operated in alignment with religious values, norms and moral codes that underpin their evangelistic mission. As one RO leader explained:

> It is better that you stand for a value that you will be respected for. The moment you begin compromising, people lose trust in you. When you over-compromise your values, in the long run, you lose respect, you lose customers, so we don't compromise our principles. (D#5)

By sacralizing business conduct with moral integrity and theological meaning, ROs identify their commercial ventures as religious-based businesses rather than distancing the ventures from associating with the sacred identity. An RO leader said, *'As long as they know this is a Catholic thing, customers will come, you don't have a lot of competition because you are the only one who can promote those values' (D#5)*. This approach enhances their legitimacy in both religious and market fields. Our informant described how faith-informed business practices became a competitive marker of moral quality, as one leader highlighted; '*customers appreciate your business because you are religious people, and religious people is associated with quality*' (I#14). Similarly, another RO leader noted; *'In all that we do, there should be that healing touch, a Christian touch'* (B#3), indicating that product excellence was understood as a material manifestation of spiritual commitment.

Furthermore, our informants highlight that ROs' reason to conduct commercial activity mobilizes more support from customers. As one leader explained:

> When somebody senses that you are not in business just to make money, you are not in business just to do personal gains and profits, I think you command respect from the other person whom you are dealing with, because they realize you're a person of values, and you have a lot more than a simple exchange of money for products. I think it definitely influences the perspective of that person or the attitude of that person towards you. (D#12)

Another informant added:

> You can see in our articles our values of compassion and caring for others. We do make money, but we don't spread hatred. We use the magazine to spread the word of God. With our articles, we just bring in the aspect of creating a good Christian. The Bible tells us you're not supposed to steal. So, if you work for your money, however little it is, you earn clean money to have a clean living. (G#8)

Through this religious embedding mechanism, ROs in our study enact distinctiveness elasticity by stretching the sacred boundary to be embedded into their secular business activity, yet reaffirming and maintaining their sacred identity. This approach preserves the sacred authenticity identity, while recognizing participation in the market.

Spiritualizing social initiatives

ROs in our study also sustain their sacred distinctiveness by recasting social initiatives as vehicles for evangelization rather than secular service provision. In doing so, they reposition activities such as education, health, and media outreach as faith-based ministries rather than philanthropic acts. For example, one informant commented:

> As you know, the main purpose of the Catholic Church is to spread the word of God, what we call it 'evangelization'. So how can the church do that? You need a voice; you need a platform where the word of God can be communicated. So, these media houses are tools of communication, they are tools of evangelization. (D#5)

Our findings indicate that this reorientation allows ROs to align social engagement with their religious mission, ensuring that community development efforts reinforce the recognition of ROs as faith-based rather than viewing them as other actors in the market. As one informant remarked:

> Every year we come together with our local community here. They [community] even formed the fans clubs, promoters. So, people subscribe, and they become promoters. So those are the people now who help to spread that message, watch our TV. (D#5)

Within the spiritualization of social activities, ROs include a message of reciprocity between people and across the community to the Church. One of our informants commented:

> When people's livelihood is improved on, they are able to listen the word of God and so they are also able to support the Church, so some begin to sustain the work of evangelization through the offertory. (P#28)

We find that spiritualizing social initiatives thus generates practical elasticity of distinctiveness, allowing ROs to blend their faith identity with secular service provision. By converting social interaction into spiritual engagement, ROs maintain their differentiation from purely charitable or commercial organizations while expanding their social reach. One of our informants shared:

> When Pope John Paul VI came to Uganda, he said 'Now Africans, you have to be missionaries to yourself'. That is all about the sustainability of faith in all ways. It is important to talk to the people every other time to contrast this mindset that it is not an NGO, so that they get to know the Church and own the Church. (B#3)

Together, both sacralizing strategies enable ROs to maintain distinctiveness elasticity as they stretch the sacred boundary to participate in secular domains without losing religious distinctiveness.

Discussion

Organizations are increasingly expected to extend their activities beyond traditional domains in order to secure resources, respond to stakeholder demands, and remain socially relevant. For ROs, expanding beyond sacred spiritual roles poses acute identity challenges, as engagement in social and business activities introduce tensions stemming from competing role expectations. In this study, we examined how ROs pursuing social and commercial entrepreneurial initiatives alongside their religious role navigate identity multiplicity. We identify *infusion-based identity*

elasticity as a distinct mode through which RO leaders infuse business and social roles with religious meaning, redefining economic activity as a morally and spiritually appropriate form of action. In doing so, we contribute to the research on identity elasticity theory (Kreiner et al. 2015), while also advancing the growing 'theological turn' in entrepreneurship research (Gümüsay 2020; B. R. Smith, McMullen, and Cardon 2021), and extending research on multiple organizational identities literature (Battilana and Dorado 2010; Pratt and Foreman 2000). In the sections that follow, we discuss the theoretical contributions, practical implications, and directions for future research.

Infusion-based identity elasticity within religious organizations

Our study makes a primary contribution to identity elasticity theory (Kreiner et al. 2015) by identifying *infusion-based identity elasticity* as a mechanism of identity work in ROs through which identity multiplicity is managed. ROs in our study retain a mission-centric identity role (evangelism) while employing balancing and sacralizing strategies that infuse religious interpretations into social and commercial activities. Prior theorization of identity elasticity emphasizes discursive mechanisms that reorder priorities and meanings across the three dimensions of organizational identity – centrality, endurance, and distinctiveness (Kreiner et al. 2015). Specifically, Kreiner et al. (2015) identified various organizational identity work such as subordinating conflicting claims or prioritizing plurality to facilitate elasticity in the centrality dialectic, framing change as consistent with past trajectories or normalizing controversy to facilitate elasticity in the endurance dialectic, and embracing inclusive external trends or crafting internal distinctiveness to facilitate elasticity in the distinctiveness dialectic. Across these mechanisms, identity work primarily targets identity labels and claims, whereby organizations stretch identity by reordering, reframing, or legitimating what counts as 'who we are'.

Extending this literature, our findings show that identity elasticity in ROs can also operate through an infusion-based elasticity that targets practice domains ('what we do'), whereby social and business roles are reconstituted as sacred forms of roles. When ROs expand into social service provision and commercial activity, elasticity does not arise primarily from renegotiating which identities matter most. Instead, ROs project sacred meaning outward, reconstituting these roles as religious practices. For example, social services are enacted as religious compassion, and business activities as religious stewardship, often described as business with a 'Christian touch'. Through this infusion of sacred meanings, practices, and moral codes, the identity roles are constituted as legitimate enactments of sacred commitments rather than experienced as secular incursions. In this way, ROs extend sacred meaning across markets and welfare provision through explicitly religious enactments (e.g. ethical rules, moral accountability).

Infusion-based elasticity as a mechanism for managing identity multiplicity in ROs differs from previously theorized mechanisms in two key respects. First, rather than relegating social or commercial roles to peripheral status, infusion-based elasticity reconstitutes these roles as legitimate enactments of sacred identity claims. Social and business roles are not integrated as additional identity labels within the spiritual identity of ROs; instead, sacred meanings are extended into how these roles are performed, allowing role expansion without reordering or compromising organizational identity claims treated as religiously central. Second, infusion-based elasticity does not require redefining organizational identity around abstract plurality or hybridity. Instead, it stretches sacred identity claims into new domains of practice, shifting the locus of elasticity from identity labels ('who we are') to role enactments ('how we act'), thereby ensuring continuity without diluting religious meaning boundaries. We show that elasticity is achieved in ROs pursuing entrepreneurial initiatives through changes in role enactment, whereby sacred meanings, values, and moral codes guide how social and commercial roles are implemented. Through this practice-based infusion, ROs expand across heterogeneous roles without merging or hybridizing identity domains, while keeping sacred

identity claims uncontested within organizational discourse. Thus, our study broadens identity elasticity theory (Kreiner et al. 2015) by identifying infusion-based identity elasticity as a distinct mechanism through which ROs navigate multiple role identities across claims of centrality, endurance, and distinctiveness.

Entrepreneurship within religious organizations

Our study also makes a contribution to the growing 'theological turn' in entrepreneurship research (Gümüsay 2020; B. R. Smith, McMullen, and Cardon 2021) by re-specifying how ROs engage in entrepreneurship and how sacredness shapes entrepreneurial action at the organizational level. Prior research in this emerging subfield has primarily examined how religious beliefs, values, or identities influence entrepreneurial motivation, persistence, and outcomes, often focusing on individuals or on religion as an antecedent to opportunity pursuit (e.g. Gümüsay 2020; B. Smith, Gümüsay, and Townsend 2023; B. R. Smith et al. 2019). While this work has been instrumental in establishing religion as a legitimate domain for entrepreneurship scholarship, less attention has been given to how ROs themselves engage in entrepreneurship (Johnson and Jian 2017; van Werven 2024), and navigate multiple identity tensions arising from competing role expectations.

By examining ROs pursuing social and business entrepreneurship, our study responds directly to calls for research on religious-driven entrepreneurship and the recursive influence of entrepreneurial action on religious identity and practices (B. Smith, Gümüsay, and Townsend 2023). Our findings show that when entrepreneurship is enacted by organizations with sacred identity claims, entrepreneurial activities are not merely motivated by religious values but are constituted through sacred meanings and practices. For instance, social services and commercial ventures are not framed as secular economic activities compatible with religion; rather, they are reconstituted as platforms through which sacred commitments are enacted, extended, and sustained. This moves beyond conceptualizations of religion as an input to entrepreneurship (Dana 2009; Gümüsay 2020; B. R. Smith, McMullen, and Cardon 2021) and demonstrates how entrepreneurship becomes a site for the enactment and articulation of religious identity at the organizational level. In doing so, our study advances the theological turn in entrepreneurship research by positioning sacredness-driven entrepreneurship as an organizing logic of entrepreneurial action in ROs. Moreover, we document how ROs respond to secularization pressures linked to competing roles and resource scarcity by strengthening the sacral framing of social and commercial activities. This framing differentiates these initiatives from those of secular organizations and, in some cases, supporting their market positioning. Overall, our findings show that religious entrepreneurship in ROs is not simply a variant of social or values-based entrepreneurship, but a distinct domain in which opportunities, practices, and outcomes are shaped by commitments to faith, transcendent meanings, and ultimate goods (B. R. Smith, McMullen, and Cardon 2021). By shifting analytical attention from individual entrepreneurs to ROs, our study empirically explains how entrepreneurship and religious identity in ROs are mutually constituted, highlighting how identity multiplicity is managed while maintaining an enduring sacred core.

Management of multiple organizational identities in religious organizations

Our study contributes to the literature on managing multiple organizational identities by reframing how identity multiplicity is sustained in organizations with sacred identity claims treated as authoritative. Prior research on multiple organizational identities has predominantly focused on how organizations integrate, compartmentalize, aggregate, or prioritize distinct identity domains in response to competing logics (Battilana and Dorado 2010; Pratt and Foreman 2000). These approaches often assume that organizational leaders possess broad managerial discretion and control in managing identity tensions (Pratt and Foreman 2000). In our study, we find that RO leaders, whose agency is constrained by hierarchical authority and doctrinal obedience (Tracey

2012), nevertheless actively manage multiple salient identities through ongoing meaning-making and practice-based identity work. This reframing extends research on multiple organizational identities to contexts where identity claims are symbolically settled but practically expansive.

First, we provide insight into the directionality of identity work in ROs managing multiple identities. Because sacred identity claims are constructed as transcendent, timeless, and morally authoritative, they are resistant to reordering or compromise (Barentsen 2021; Johnson and Jian 2017; Kreiner et al. 2015). This helps explain why ROs do not rely on identity management mechanisms common in secular organizations, such as inward integration or compartmentalization of competing roles (Pratt and Foreman 2000). Instead, ROs project sacred meanings outward, embedding religious values, symbols, and moral authority into social and business domains. Identity multiplicity is thus addressed not by reshaping sacred identity claims to accommodate new roles, but by extending sacred identity enactments across heterogeneous domains of action. This outward directionality distinguishes identity work in ROs from integrative or hybridizing approaches documented in secular organizations.

Second, our findings re-specify the ontological status of social and business roles in ROs managing multiple identities. Prior studies suggest that multiple and competing roles can be managed by positioning them as peripheral or instrumental (Pratt and Foreman 2000), or by hybridizing identities into a new organizational form (Battilana and Dorado 2010). In contrast, our findings show that social and business roles in ROs are neither peripheral nor autonomous identity domains. Rather, they are conducted as religiously constituted practices through infusion-based identity work. Activities in education, healthcare, media, and commercial ventures are enacted as expressions of religious compassion, stewardship, and evangelization. Through this practice-based constitution, social and commercial roles derive legitimacy from their framing as sacred work, rather than from formal identity integration or restructuring.

Practical implications for religious organizations

Our study offers important practical insights for missionary organizations operating in Uganda and similar contexts. These organizations often face pressure to expand social services and achieve financial self-sufficiency, which can generate identity tensions as they are increasingly perceived as charity organizations rather than religious entities, raising concerns about mission drift (Ndzovu 2020; C. Smith 2017). Our findings suggest that ROs address multiple identity tensions not by separating or integrating roles, but through identity work that frames social and commercial activities as meaningful enactments of sacred commitments. For instance, mission-centric framing enables leaders to communicate new business ventures not as secular distractions, but as acts of stewardship that are aligned with religious commitments, helping to secure internal legitimacy and congregational support. Similarly, sacralizing strategies allow social and commercial initiatives to be enacted in explicitly religious ways, transforming these activities into platforms through which sacred meanings are expressed and reinforced in practice. RO leaders also used balancing strategy to cross-subsidize multiple role by allocating income-generating activities to sustain charitable and evangelistic commitments.

Beyond organizational leadership, our findings have implications for development practitioners and donors working with faith-based organizations. Rather than treating ROs as either purely sacred institutions or secular NGOs, practitioners may benefit from recognizing how religious meanings are enacted across social and commercial activities. Supporting ROs through capacity-building initiatives or funding arrangements that are sensitive to faith-infused practices may enable these organizations to sustain their religious commitments while responding to local social and economic needs (Mudau and Tshifhumulo 2024; Turner and Lee 2024). Such an approach aligns support with the ways ROs themselves understand and enact their roles, rather than imposing externally defined organizational categories.

Limitations and future research

While our study offers important insights, several limitations warrant attention. First, our focus on ROs in Uganda provides rich contextual depth, but it may limit the transferability of our findings to other religious and cultural contexts. The specific historical, institutional, and socio-economic conditions of Uganda shape how ROs' identity tensions are articulated and navigated. Second, our methodological approach, relying primarily on interviews with organizational leaders, captures official accounts and leadership interpretations but may not fully reflect the lived experiences of non-leadership members or community beneficiaries. Third, although we identify key identity work mechanisms, our cross-sectional design does not allow us to examine how these practices are sustained, reinterpreted, or contested over time, nor to assess their longer-term implications. These limitations, however, open productive avenues for future research. Comparative qualitative studies could examine how identity elasticity is enacted in ROs across different religious traditions (e.g. Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist organizations) and in more secularized or economically developed contexts, helping to clarify how institutional and theological conditions shape identity work processes. Longitudinal research designs could also examine the process of how identity elasticity unfolds over time, particularly during periods of heightened strain when existing identity arrangements become difficult to sustain, potentially leading to reinterpretation, fragmentation, or organizational reconfiguration. Finally, future research could build on our findings by examining how different forms of identity work are associated with organizational trajectories, for example through mixed-methods studies that connect qualitative accounts of identity elasticity with broader patterns of organizational adaptation, resource acquisition, or stakeholder support.

Conclusion

We examined how ROs engaging in social and commercial entrepreneurial activities navigate identity tensions arising from expanding role expectations. Our study shows that ROs enact infusion-based identity elasticity, explaining how organizations with sacred identity claims address identity multiplicity by infusing social and business practices with religious meanings rather than by reordering, subordinating, or integrating identity roles. By constituting social and business roles as religious forms of action, ROs navigate multiple identity tensions, while extending sacred meaning into new domains of activity.

Notes

1. https://aruconference.org/.
2. https://data.worldbank.org/country/uganda?view=chart.
3. We referred to our study informants as RO leaders throughout the manuscript for consistency.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was conducted with the contribution of Fondazione Cariplo "Orchestrating inclusive transformation through entrepreneurship: the role of social intermediaries in sub-Saharan Africa", ID. 2023-1645 (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore).

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