

State and Religious Pluralism: Tensions and Complementarity in Social Policies

*O Estado e o pluralismo religioso em Angola: conflitos regulatórios e cooperação nas
políticas sociais*

Estado y pluralismo religioso: tensiones y complementariedad en las políticas sociales

João Eduardo Quinsequi¹

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8379-7133>

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the relationship between the State and religious pluralism within Angolan social policies, a context marked by structural inequalities, colonial legacies, and institutional fragilities resulting from the civil war (1975-2002). The problematic situation motivating this study lies in the regulatory conflicts generated by the proliferation of unregistered churches and disputes over public and symbolic space, whilst these organisations simultaneously play a relevant role in the provision of social services. The central objective was to understand the existing tensions and complementarities between the State and religious organisations in the implementation of social policies. Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative and theoretical-critical approach, based on the documentary and hermeneutic analysis of legal, academic, and journalistic sources produced between 2002 and 2025. The results demonstrate that, despite tensions caused by uneven regulation and religious interference in matters of gender, secularism, and human rights, significant collaborative practices exist in sectors such as education, health, and social assistance. It is concluded that religious pluralism, while challenging secularism and state governance, also represents a potential catalyst for inclusion, solidarity, and the strengthening of social cohesion, demanding an ethical and mediatory stance from Social Work.

Keywords: State; Religious Pluralism; Regulatory Conflicts; Social Policies; Social Work.

RESUMO

O presente artigo analisa as relações entre o Estado e o pluralismo religioso nas políticas sociais em Angola, num contexto marcado por desigualdades estruturais, heranças coloniais e fragilidades institucionais resultantes da guerra civil (1975 - 2002). A situação problemática que motivou o estudo reside nos conflitos regulatórios gerados pela proliferação de igrejas não registadas e pela disputa pelo espaço público e simbólico, ao mesmo tempo em que essas organizações

¹ Bachelor's Degree in Educational Sciences, specialising in Sociology, from ISCED-Luanda, and Master's Candidate in Social Work and Social Policy at the Universidade Católica de Angola. University Lecturer and Coordinator of the Bachelor's Degree in Pre-School Education at the Instituto Superior Politécnico Ndunduma (Bié), Angola. quinsequi@outlook.com

desempenham um papel relevante na provisão de serviços sociais. O objectivo central consistiu em compreender as tensões e as complementaridades existentes entre o Estado e as organizações religiosas na implementação das políticas sociais. Metodologicamente, o estudo adoptou uma abordagem qualitativa e teórico-crítica, baseada na análise documental e hermenêutica de fontes jurídicas, académicas e jornalísticas produzidas entre 2002 e 2025. Os resultados evidenciam que, apesar das tensões provocadas pela regulação desigual e pela interferência religiosa em temas de género, laicidade e direitos humanos, existem práticas colaborativas significativas em sectores como a educação, a saúde e a assistência social. Conclui-se que o pluralismo religioso, embora desafie a laicidade e a governança estatal, representa também um potencial catalisador de inclusão, solidariedade e fortalecimento da coesão social, exigindo uma postura ética e mediadora do Serviço Social.

Palavras-chave: Estado; pluralismo religioso; conflitos regulatórios; políticas sociais; Serviço Social.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo analiza la relación entre el Estado y el pluralismo religioso en las políticas sociales en Angola, en un contexto marcado por desigualdades estructurales, herencias coloniales y fragilidades institucionales derivadas de la guerra civil (1975 - 2002). La situación problemática que motivó el estudio se centra en los conflictos regulatorios generados por la proliferación de iglesias no registradas y por la disputa por el espacio público y simbólico, al mismo tiempo que dichas organizaciones desempeñan un papel importante en la provisión de servicios sociales. El objetivo principal fue comprender las tensiones y complementariedades existentes entre el Estado y las organizaciones religiosas en la implementación de las políticas sociales. Metodológicamente, se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo y teórico-crítico, basado en el análisis documental y hermenéutico de fuentes jurídicas, académicas y periodísticas producidas entre 2002 y 2025. Los resultados muestran que, a pesar de las tensiones derivadas de la regulación desigual y de la interferencia religiosa en cuestiones de género, laicidad y derechos humanos, existen prácticas de cooperación relevantes en los sectores de la educación, la salud y la asistencia social. Se concluye que el pluralismo religioso, aunque desafía la laicidad y la gobernanza estatal, también constituye un potencial catalizador de inclusión, solidaridad y fortalecimiento de la cohesión social, requiriendo una postura ética y mediadora del Trabajo Social.

Palabras clave: Estado; Pluralismo Religioso; Tensiones; Políticas Sociales; Trabajo Social.

INTRODUCTION

The formulation and implementation of social policies in Angola have taken place in a context deeply marked by persistent structural inequalities, colonial legacies, and the lasting effects of the civil war (1975-2002), which weakened the country's social and institutional fabric. According to data from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2024), Angola occupies one of the lowest positions on the Southern Africa Human Development Index (HDI), with approximately 32% of the population living below the poverty line and facing unequal access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and sanitation. The National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2023) indicates that poverty rates are particularly high in rural areas, affecting over 50% of households, whilst literacy and infant mortality indicators reveal significant regional disparities. These quantitative elements reinforce that Angolan social policies have been conceived within a framework of profound socio-economic asymmetries and limited institutional capacity. In this scenario, the State, as the primary guarantor of social rights, faces considerable challenges in ensuring the universality, equity, and effectiveness of public policies, often constrained by institutional weaknesses, resource scarcity, and uneven territorial distribution.

In the face of these limitations, other entities have emerged as relevant actors in the provision of social services, among which religiously-inspired organisations stand out. Religiosity in Angola is deeply rooted in the sociocultural structures of communities, exerting a significant influence on both individual behaviour and collective dynamics. Churches and faith-based organisations act directly in crucial areas such as food assistance, healthcare, education, and the reception of vulnerable populations, often substituting or complementing State action.

This presence, however, is not without contradictions. Although religious organisations in Angola promote solidarity and community cohesion, especially in contexts of poverty and institutional fragility, some reproduce conservative values and exclusionary practices. Cases are observed of the marginalisation of women, the stigmatisation of marginalised groups, and discrimination against religions of African origin, deemed 'non-Christian' (Nicácio, 2023; Quiala, 2025).

Reports from DW Africa (2025) further point to restrictions on the participation of believers in reproductive health programmes, reinforcing gender barriers and limiting access to rights. Such practices demonstrate that, whilst promoting solidarity, churches can also perpetuate inequalities, requiring ethical and inclusive mediation from the State and Social Work.

Consequently, this article aims to analyse, in light of the Angolan reality, the tensions and complementarities existing between the State and religious organisations in the field of social policies. To this end, the text engages with the theoretical-methodological foundations of Social Work and the critical perspective of social policy, paying attention to the ethical, political, and operational implications of acting within a context marked by the intersection of faith, poverty, and social rights.

METHODOLOGY

Approach and Design

The study adopts a qualitative and theoretical-critical approach, with a descriptive-analytical design. It seeks to understand social and discursive processes (State-religion relations) through the systematic interpretation of legal documents, academic works, and relevant journalistic reports pertaining to the Angolan context.

Unit of Analysis and Temporal Scope

The unit of analysis comprises institutional discourses (legislation and official statements), scientific literature on the State, religion, and social policies, and journalistic articles documenting cases of conflict and cooperation. The temporal scope considered documents and publications produced between 2002 (post-civil war and intensification of religious pluralism) and 2025, a sufficient horizon to incorporate constitutional changes and reported incidents during the process of institutional regeneration.

Sources and Selection Criteria

Three categories of sources were selected:

- 1. Legal and Institutional Documents:** Constitution of the Republic of Angola (2010), and legislative documents or proposals related to the registration and regulation of religious denominations;
- 2. Academic Works and Books:** Theoretical and empirical studies on religious pluralism, social policies, and Social Work (e.g., Monteiro, Fernando, Brepohl, Nicácio, and others);
- 3. Journalistic Sources and Reports:** Press articles and reports documenting specific cases (e.g., DW – Lusa, Jornal EMÉ, Vatican News), used to illustrate and empirically situate the analysed categories;

4. The inclusion criteria were: relevance to the State/religion theme; quality and credibility of the source; temporal and geographical representativeness (Angola); and theoretical or empirical contribution to the categories under study.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was documentary and systematic, adhering to bibliographic surveys in academic repositories and institutional catalogues, consultation of newspapers and news portals, and retrieval of legal texts from official sources (website of the National Assembly and governmental publications). The final corpus consisted of 33 documents, including legal, academic, and journalistic texts produced between 2002 and 2025, which were organised into reading notes and analytical spreadsheets (**see Appendix B**).

Thematic Content Analysis (Bardin, 2011)

The analysis followed the classic procedures of content analysis:

- 1. Pre-analysis:** initial reading of the corpus to delimit themes and construct the initial analytical framework;
- 2. Material Exploration (Coding):** open and manual coding of relevant excerpts, assigning initial codes (e.g., REG-01 = “church registration and oversight”; LIB-02 = “clash between dogma and rights”; COP-01 = “partnerships in health/education”);
- 3. Treatment of Results:** grouping codes into thematic categories (state regulation; religious freedom; social cooperation; secularism) and qualitative quantification of theme recurrence;
- 4. Critical Interpretation:** relating the categories to the theoretical framework of Social Work and analysing the political-ethical implications.

These categories guide the thematic sections: for example, the “state regulation” category structures the discussion on registration proposals and conflict cases; “social cooperation” supports the analysis of State-church partnerships; and “secularism” permeates the normative reflection and is mobilised in the conclusions (**see Appendix A**).

Source Triangulation and Validity Verification

Validity was sought through triangulation between different types of sources (legal, academic, and journalistic) and methodological transparency (source recording and relation between excerpts and codes). Furthermore, an internal consistency audit was conducted, comparing interpretations extracted from legal texts and case reports, to identify inconsistencies and ensure inferences are supported by evidence.

Hermeneutic Critique

A hermeneutic approach was used to interpret institutional and religious discourses, adopting an interpretive movement that dialogues with historical and normative assumptions: 1) contextualisation of the statement; 2) identification of implicit assumptions; 3) confrontation of these assumptions with the principles of secularism and human rights; 4) critical reflection on ensuing political and ethical consequences.

This reading was applied, for example, in interpreting official positions on church registration and discussions about state intervention in matters of public morality, identifying tensions between normative statements and effective practices.

Reliability, Limitations, and Ethical Considerations

To enhance reliability, a reading log with extracts and analytical notes was maintained, and critical peer review was conducted (supervision and externalised reading). Among the limitations, the absence of primary data (interviews or field observations) is highlighted, which required greater caution when generalising empirical results. As a documentary study, ethical care was observed in citing cases and respecting the privacy of any information about individuals disseminated by the press.

Appendices and Methodological Transparency

The inclusion of appendices with the codebook and the complete list of the documentary corpus (with URLs and metadata) was opted for, to enable reproducibility and peer scrutiny in future submissions.

Therefore, the methodology combined thematic content analysis, source triangulation, and critical hermeneutic reading, articulating analytical rigour and normative interpretation, to provide reliable support for assertions about regulatory conflicts and forms of cooperation between the State and religious denominations in Angolan social policies.

STATE, SOCIAL POLICY, AND RELIGIOSITY IN ANGOLA

Addressing the concept of the State has proven, over time, to be a complex task, particularly due to the diversity of conceptual approaches and its multifaceted action in society. Nevertheless, this article proposes a brief theoretical exploration based on various authors, with the aim of outlining the essential contours of this entity as a central actor in social policies.

From Max Weber's perspective (2011, p. 11), the State is understood as "that human community which, within a given territory, successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force." This perspective emphasises the coercive and territorial character of the State as a legitimate instance for exercising authority. Lakatos and Marconi (2019, p. 220) reinforce this idea by stating that the State exercises authority over its people through a supreme government, within defined territorial borders, possessing the exclusive right to regulate the use of force. This view introduces the centrality of government as the executive body that maintains order, establishes norms, and organises social relations among citizens.

In the same vein, Johnson (1997, p. 91) characterises the State as an institution organised around a set of essential social functions, such as the maintenance of law and order, dispute resolution, common defence, and care for the population's welfare, promoting actions that exceed individual capacities, such as public health, large-scale education, and investments in medical research. However, from a critical perspective, Johnson warns that the State, in contexts of conflict, often acts in favour of the interests of dominant groups, whether economic, racial, or ethnic.

Amor Monteiro (2020, p. 221) highlights that the State arises from the need to contain class antagonisms, typically aligning itself with the economically dominant class. This view, of Marxist lineage, understands the State as an expression of the contradictions of capitalism. However, approaches such as the Weberian one, which conceives it as a rational structure geared towards order (Weber, 1999), and the neo-institutionalist one, which sees it as a mediator of social interests (Evans, 1995), offer complementary readings. Thus, the State is also a space for dispute and consensus-building, relevant for understanding public policies and religious pluralism.

In turn, Bull (2002, pp. 13-20), "considers that the State claims sovereignty over a specific territory and people, exercising significant influence over internal and external decisions through a set of norms and rules regulating these interactions."

Louis Althusser (1980, pp. 2-6), in a Marxist approach, identifies the State as a "repressive apparatus" at the service of the ruling class, sustained by institutions such as the government,

administration, army, and police, whose action is based predominantly on violence and the ideological control of the working class.

István Mészáros (apud Monteiro, 2020, p. 221), understands the State as a totalising structure of political command, essential for the sociometabolic control of capital. From this perspective, the modern State intervenes not only to maintain social order but also to guarantee the reproduction of the capitalist system, operating as a mediator and facilitator of capital accumulation through economic, social, and legislative policies that favour the logic of profit. Thus, according to Amor Monteiro (2020), the contemporary State not only manages social needs and promotes some economic development but also acts as an active agent in the reproduction of capital, serving the structural interests of the capitalist system.

In light of these diverse approaches, it becomes clear that the State is simultaneously a mechanism of social control, a normative and regulatory entity, and a political actor that can both promote social justice and perpetuate inequalities, depending on the social and ideological forces that guide it.

In Angola, this complexity manifests itself in the regulation of religious denominations, marked by processes of selective recognition and the closure of unlicensed churches (DW Africa, 2024), as well as in cooperation between the State and historical denominations, such as the CEAST, in social assistance and education actions (Vatican News, 2023).

Such dynamics reveal that the Angolan State acts simultaneously as an agent of institutional control and a partner in the implementation of social policies, reflecting the permanent tension between secularism, religious pluralism, and the pursuit of social justice.

SOCIAL POLICY

To address the concept of social policy, we start from the definition proposed by Hamilton (2023, p. 1), according to which it is a set of government policies, actions, programmes, or initiatives designed to address and improve social problems. Social policy, in this context, is conceived as an essential instrument for promoting collective well-being and as an institutional response to social inequalities and vulnerabilities. However, its implementation in Angola faces serious structural constraints, such as limited financial resources, dependence on oil revenues, and the fragility of public institutions (World Bank, 2023; UNDP, 2024).

These factors condition the reach and sustainability of social policies, which, although representing advances on a normative level, still lack effectiveness and equity in practice, especially in rural areas and among socially marginalised groups.

According to Santos (1989, apud Carvalho, 2007, p. 75), “social policy should be understood as any policy that orders ‘tragic choices’ according to a consistent and coherent principle of justice.” For this author, social policy represents, in a way, a meta-political instance that guides and justifies the ordering of all other public policies, based on a normative conception of social justice.

According to Hamilton (2023, p. 1), social policies encompass a vast range of domains from education, health, employment, criminal justice, housing, social assistance, food security, to other areas fundamental to life in society. They constitute corrective mechanisms that aim to mitigate the effects of inequalities generated by the capitalist system, without necessarily questioning its foundational structures (Monteiro, 2020).

Similarly, Rossales (2023) adds that social policies seek to guarantee equality of opportunity, reduce economic and social disparities, and ensure universal access to essential services. Their central objectives are the redistribution of resources, protection against social risks, and the promotion of inclusion, in accordance with the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution.

However, in Angola, the realisation of these principles faces significant challenges. Programmes such as Kwenda, aimed at cash transfers to families in vulnerable situations, and the Integrated Plan for Municipal Interventions (PIIM), which seeks to reduce territorial inequalities through local investments, represent important advances, although they still present limitations in coverage, transparency, and sustainability (World Bank, 2023; UNDP, 2024).

Thus, a gap persists between the normative ideal and institutional practice, reflecting the difficulty in transforming social policies into effective instruments of social justice and equity.

From the same author's perspective, the State holds the central role of planning, regulating, and managing the application of these resources, with a focus on the population's well-being and social justice. The implementation of social policies can have a profound impact on people's daily lives, by guaranteeing the improvement of public services, the protection of vulnerable groups, and the reinforcement of social cohesion (Rossales, 2023).

Based on the conceptions presented, social policy configures itself as a fundamental dimension of public policies, specifically oriented towards collective well-being through distributive, protective, and inclusive measures. It is a field that articulates social needs, citizenship rights, and political responsibility, integrating diverse areas with the purpose of confronting inequalities and promoting social justice in contexts marked by exclusion, poverty, and vulnerability.

RELIGIOSITY IN ANGOLA: BRIEF HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Religiosity in Angola has a long and complex trajectory, marked by profound transformations from the pre-colonial era to contemporary times, reflecting dynamics of resistance, domination, and cultural reinterpretation.

The official presence of Christianity in Angolan territory dates back to the 15th century, with the arrival of the first Portuguese Catholic missionaries in 1491 and the subsequent creation of the Diocese of São Salvador do Congo in 1596, later transferred to Luanda in 1676. Evangelisation occurred mainly through European religious orders such as Jesuits, Franciscans, and Capuchins, who spread Catholicism even amidst the difficulties imposed by the slave trade and conflicts with local authorities (Ferreira, 1996, pp. 309-318).

During the colonial period, Catholicism was institutionalised as the official religion of the Portuguese State, playing a central role in legitimising colonial power. However, African and syncretic religious movements also emerged, such as Tocoísmo, founded by Simão Gonçalves Toco, which sought to articulate an autonomous African religious identity, expressing forms of spiritual and cultural resistance to colonial domination (Santos, 2023, pp. 20-35).

With national independence in 1975 and the MPLA's rise to power, the Angolan State adopted a Marxist-Leninist ideology, promoting a model of state atheism and strong control over religious expressions. Between 1976 and 1991, over thirty religious denominations were suspended, dissolved, or placed under state surveillance, accused of representing threats to public order, national unity, or of maintaining political and regional ties (Morais, 2014; Mateus, 2019).

Churches such as the Our Lord Jesus Christ in the World Church (Tocoísmo) and the Kimbanguist Church were particularly targeted, with temples closed, leaders detained, and evangelistic activities restricted, due to their popular roots and symbolic association with African resistance movements (Katúmua, 2021).

These actions illustrate the State's effort to subordinate the religious field to the dominant ideology, temporarily restricting freedom of worship and reinforcing the political role of the State as a mediator of social and spiritual identities.

From the 1980s onwards, a progressive legalisation of churches and a gradual opening of religious space were observed. Denominational diversity gained prominence, especially with the proliferation of evangelical, Pentecostal, and independent African churches. However, control and regulation by the State continued to mark the religious field.

In contemporary times, Angola is characterised by evident religious pluralism, where Catholicism remains the predominant religion, followed by a growing number of Protestant churches, influenced by both historical missions and recent evangelical movements (Embassy of Angola, n.d., p. 1). Practices associated with traditional African religions also persist, particularly in rural areas, often integrated into a religious syncretism that combines Christian elements with ancestral rituals and beliefs (Fernando, 2018, pp. 1-18).

The civil war had significant impacts on the spiritual and moral values of communities, requiring processes of reconstruction and resilience in which religion played a fundamental role, be it in welcoming the displaced, social reconciliation, or the restoration of community ties (Baião, n.d., pp. 1-3).

In the post-war period, an intense proliferation of new denominations and religious sects was observed, leading the State to reinforce regulation and control mechanisms, aiming to prevent abuses and protect citizens from practices potentially harmful to their dignity (Kembo, 2014, pp. 1-14).

Religious movements of African origin, such as Kingunza, remain active and socially significant in various regions of Angola, especially in the provinces of Uíge, Kwanza Norte, and Luanda, where they congregate thousands of faithful and organised local communities (Kilala, 2016; Fernando, 2018).

These movements have promoted traditional healing rituals, community mediation activities, and campaigns valuing Bantu culture, exerting growing influence in civic and cultural spaces.

Their impact manifests not only in the preservation of African spiritual heritage but also in the public defence of religious freedom, intercultural dialogue, and cultural autonomy, challenging dominant narratives of Christian hegemony and contributing to the strengthening of religious pluralism in the country.

Thus, it can be affirmed that Angolan religiosity is the result of a historical path of colonisation, resistance, syncretism, and pluralism. In the present, it manifests itself in a wide diversity of religious expressions, where Catholicism and Protestantism coexist with independent movements and traditional forms of African spirituality, within a legal framework that guarantees religious freedom, but which also poses ethical-political challenges to the relationship between faith, State, and society.

STATE AND SOCIAL POLICIES IN CONTEXTS OF ANGOLAN RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Religious pluralism refers to the coexistence of multiple traditions, beliefs, and religious practices within a given social context. In the case of Angola, this phenomenon became particularly visible following the attainment of peace in 2002. This historical milestone triggered a veritable explosion of religious denominations, both Christian and non-Christian. According to Fernando (2018), these denominations include historical Christian churches (such as the Catholic and Methodist), neo-Pentecostal churches (of Brazilian and Congolese origin), traditional African religions, and local sects. Angolan religious pluralism is thus characterised by a great diversity of beliefs, rituals, and practices, influenced by factors of religious liberalisation and transnational dynamics (Kembo, 2014).

The freedoms of expression and choice, guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Angola (2010) in Articles 10 and 45, reinforce religious pluralism by recognising the secularity of the State

and the right to freedom of worship. This recognition imposes on the State the duty to respect, dialogue with, and promote harmony among the various legally established religious denominations.

In practice, however, the realisation of these principles is unequal. Decree No. 2/21, which regulates the exercise of religious freedom, has been applied in a restrictive manner, leading to the closure of hundreds of churches not officially recognised under the argument of guaranteeing “public order” (DW Africa, 2024).

On the other hand, the State maintains institutional partnerships with historical denominations, such as the Catholic Church and the Methodist Church, in areas of education, health, and poverty alleviation (Vatican News, 2023).

These examples reveal a regulated pluralism, in which the State seeks to balance religious freedom with institutional control, reflecting both advances and limitations in the fulfilment of constitutional rights.

The social policies of the Angolan State have shaped the way religious communities participate in society. Various churches, such as the Catholic, Methodist, and Universal churches, collaborate with the Government in education, health, and social assistance programmes, extending the reach of public policies (Vatican News, 2023; Jornal de Angola, 2024).

However, the absence of clear regulation and structured dialogue leads some denominations to operate outside official guidelines, promoting paternalistic practices and legitimacy conflicts, as demonstrated by tensions with the dissident wing of the IURD (DW África, 2024). These cases show that cooperation between the State and churches, although promising, still faces challenges of coordination and institutional coherence.

We see here an opportunity to value the social role of churches, encouraging their action as agents of inclusion, promotion of human rights, and social cohesion. Fernando (2018) argues that the multiplicity of religious actors, although representing a sign of spiritual vitality and democratisation of faith, can also generate serious challenges of coordination and regulation, especially in the face of the disorderly proliferation of new denominations operating outside state control. Indeed, journalistic and institutional reports point out that hundreds of churches continue to function without legal recognition since the implementation of Decree No. 2/21, which evidences the scale of the phenomenon (DW Africa, 2024; Quiala, 2025). Although there are no systematic quantitative data on the exact number of unregistered denominations, the absence of official statistics confirms the limitation of regulatory capacity and justifies the need for more in-depth empirical studies on the real dimension of this religious expansion.

STATE AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES IN ANGOLA

Angolan religious pluralism has raised significant tensions, resulting from factors that are interlinked. The disorganised proliferation of churches without legal recognition constitutes the main element generating instability, as it creates difficulties for oversight and weakens the State's institutional legitimacy. This unregulated expansion fuels disputes over physical and symbolic spaces, intensifying rivalries between religious denominations and local communities. Consequently, a growing socio-political influence of certain religious leaders and groups is observed, who seek to intervene in moral and political issues, often overstepping the boundaries of secularism. Thus, these three factors like proliferation, dispute, and influence, interact with each other, producing a complex scenario of tension that challenges the balance between religious freedom, state regulation, and social cohesion. Among the main examples, the following stand out:

- 1. Equitable Recognition:** despite legislation guaranteeing religious equality, some traditions, such as religions of African origin, continue to face difficulties in obtaining institutional recognition, a reflection of structural discrimination and religious exclusivism (Nicácio, 2023);
- 2. Secularism in Dispute:** religious groups have attempted to influence public policies, jeopardising the separation between Church and State and threatening rights in sensitive areas such as gender, sexuality, and reproductive health (Paulino, 2021; Jesus, 2025);
- 3. Religious Freedom vs. Human Rights:** religious dogmas have at times clashed with rights such as gender equality, leading to discriminatory policies (Jesus, 2025);
- 4. Internal Conflicts and Abuses:** cases such as the schism within the IURD, involving confrontations, detentions, and xenophobia (Lusa, 2024), or the growth of exploitative sects promoting abusive practices against vulnerable believers and children (Quiala, 2025), show the gravity of the scenario;
- 5. Irregular Occupation of Public Space:** some churches occupy spaces intended for education and culture irregularly, generating tensions with civil society (Quiala, 2025).

Despite these challenges, a growing complementarity between the State and religious denominations is observed. This cooperation can be structured around the following axes:

- 1. Promotion of Fundamental Rights:** the State and religions can cooperate in promoting human dignity, social justice, and solidarity (Bobrzyk & Shoeninger, 2024);
- 2. Social Partnerships:** churches have developed relevant social projects, especially in areas such as education and health, which can be leveraged by the State (Vatican News, 2023, p. 1);
- 3. Guarantee of Religious Freedom:** a secular state must ensure that all religious denominations freely exercise their worship (Mariano, 2002);
- 4. Construction of Civic Values:** the interaction between religion and State can reinforce citizenship, plurality, and peaceful coexistence (Brepohl, 2016);
- 5. Conflict Mediation:** during the civil war, churches played a fundamental role in mediation and reconciliation, a role that can be reinforced by the State today.

However, this complementarity is not without challenges. Some key challenges include:

- 1. Regulation and Legalisation:** the growth of unregistered churches poses challenges to effective regulation. The registration process since 2019 has been restrictive, leaving many communities vulnerable (Laureiro, n.d., p. 1);
- 2. Specific Legislation:** the proposal to require theological training for religious leaders aims to organise the sector and combat abuses but raises questions about the limits of state intervention (Jornal EMÉ, 2025, p. 1);
- 3. Promotion of Social Peace:** the State's need to foster inter-religious dialogue to prevent conflicts (Camuto, 2025);
- 4. Combating Intimidation and Persecution:** unregistered churches face threats and reprisals, which compromises effective religious freedom.

Angolan religious pluralism constitutes a cultural and spiritual wealth, but also a field of social tensions and challenges. The State's response must be based on dialogue, balanced legislation, and the strengthening of cooperation between public power and religious denominations, simultaneously ensuring secularism, human rights, and social cohesion.

STATE AND SOCIAL POLICIES IN CONTEXTS OF ANGOLAN RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Religious pluralism refers to the coexistence of multiple traditions, beliefs, and religious practices within a given social context. In the case of Angola, this phenomenon became particularly visible following the attainment of peace in 2002. This historical milestone triggered a genuine explosion of religious denominations, both Christian and non-Christian. According to Fernando (2018), these denominations include historical Christian churches (such as the Catholic and Methodist), neo-Pentecostal churches (of Brazilian and Congolese origin), traditional African religions, and local sects. Angolan religious pluralism is thus characterised by a great diversity of beliefs, rituals, and practices, influenced by factors of religious liberalisation and transnational dynamics (Kembo, 2014).

The freedoms of expression and choice guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Angola (2010), in Articles 10 and 45, reinforce this pluralism by recognising the secularity of the State and the right to religious freedom. This recognition requires the State to respect, dialogue with, and promote harmony among the various religious denominations, and enshrines the acceptance of any denomination legally established in the national territory.

The social policies of the Angolan State have significantly influenced the way religious communities participate in society. Various denominations such as the Catholic Church, the Methodist Church, and the Universal Church have cooperated with the State in education, health, and social assistance programmes, extending the reach of public policies (Vatican News, 2023; Jornal de Angola, 2024).

However, some religious groups have adopted practices contrary to the principles of social policies, such as refusing to support vaccination campaigns or discriminating against women and minorities in community projects, contradicting goals of inclusion and equality (DW Africa, 2024; UNDP, 2024). Cases such as the conflict between the Government and the dissident wing of the IURD, marked by allegations of political manipulation and abusive practices, exemplify the tensions between faith and social policy.

These episodes demonstrate that, although collaboration between the State and churches is significant, ethical and regulatory challenges persist that compromise the coherence and effectiveness of public policies in a context of religious pluralism. We see here an opportunity to value the social role of churches, encouraging their action as agents of inclusion, promotion of human rights, and social cohesion.

STATE AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: TENSIONS, CHALLENGES, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK IN ANGOLA

Religious pluralism in Angola, while revealing a remarkable spiritual diversity, imposes significant challenges on State action and the professional practice of Social Work. The tensions resulting from the disorderly proliferation of churches, disputes over spheres of influence, and the growing religious intervention in political issues demand from social workers an ethical, critical, and mediatory stance.

The complexity of these dynamics requires Social Work to undertake an in-depth reading of the intersections between faith, power, and citizenship, as well as the ability to intervene in contexts where secularism, gender equality, and human rights are called into question. Thus, beyond identifying conflicts, it is important to understand how public policies and religious practices can be articulated cooperatively, based on mutual respect and the promotion of the common good.

In this sense, the implications for Social Work focus on three main dimensions:

1. Mediation and Dialogue: promoting bridges between public institutions and religious communities, fostering understanding and inter-religious cooperation;

2. Defence of Secularism and Human Rights: ensuring that faith is not instrumentalised to justify discriminatory practices;

3. Ethical and Intercultural Training: equipping professionals to deal with plural contexts, sensitive to Angolan religious and cultural diversity.

In this way, religious pluralism ceases to be merely a field of tensions to become a space for social learning and the construction of plural citizenship, in which Social Work plays an essential role of balance and transformation.

Ethical and Political Implications for Social Work

The ethical and political implications of religious pluralism in Angola require a critical positioning from Social Work, capable of responding to contemporary challenges:

Ethical Implications

1. Neutrality and Respect for Diversity: Social Work professionals must ensure their interventions do not reproduce religious discrimination, promoting an impartial approach, especially in family or community mediations generated by changes in religious affiliation (Morais, 2014);

2. Combating Abusive Practices: it is essential to identify and combat abusive practices promoted by certain religious leaders, such as financial exploitation and symbolic violence. Social Work must act as a partner of the State in denouncing and mediating these practices, promoting sustainable alternatives for social cohesion (Quinsequi, 2019).

3. Promotion of Universal Rights: Social Work must prioritise the promotion of fundamental rights, such as education and health, over religious dogmas, especially in communities marked by social inequalities.

Political Implications

1. Mediation between State and Religious Communities: the implementation of standardised training for religious leaders and cooperation with Social Work professionals could, in a way, facilitate dialogue with legally recognised religious institutions and prevent marginalisation;

2. Advocacy for Inclusive Policies: social workers must advocate for the effective fulfilment of the Constitution, confronting the political instrumentalisation of religions and promoting equity in access to public resources.

In practice, this implies acting in local councils and inter-religious forums, mediating relations between the State and faith communities, and promoting education in human rights and secularism.

They can also monitor public policies, denounce religious exclusions, and propose transparency mechanisms, strengthening democratic and inclusive governance in a context of strong religious influence.

3. Confronting Fundamentalism: Social Work must demystify the individual blame promoted by certain religious denominations and foster collective analyses on the origin of social inequalities.

Strategic Challenges

1. Training in Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue: the State should promote local Theology courses, including disciplines such as Social Psychology, Human Relations, Sociology, and Social Work, to prepare religious leaders to act in pluralist contexts;

2. Data Production and Monitoring: the creation of monitoring programmes and community mapping by social workers will allow a better understanding of the impact of religions on living conditions and improve social responses.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to understand the tensions and complementarities existing between the State and religious pluralism in Angolan social policies, within a context deeply marked by structural inequalities, colonial legacies, and institutional fragilities inherited from the civil war. It started from the recognition that religiosity constitutes an essential dimension of Angolan social life, simultaneously a promoter of solidarity and a generator of normative, ethical, and political conflicts.

The results of the documentary and hermeneutic analysis revealed that the Angolan State faces a dual challenge: on one hand, guaranteeing religious freedom and the exercise of faith in a democratic and plural environment, and on the other, ensuring secularism and balanced regulation of religious denominations, preventing abuses and ensuring the coherence of public policies. The proliferation of unregistered churches, the irregular occupation of public spaces, and religious interference in sensitive issues such as gender and human rights demonstrate that the coexistence between religion and State is marked by persistent ambiguities and tensions.

On the other hand, the research evidenced that religious organisations play a fundamental role in the provision of social goods and services, especially in the areas of education, health, and assistance to vulnerable groups, where they frequently complement state action. This cooperation, when guided by ethical principles and social justice, constitutes a strategic resource for the promotion of the common good and the strengthening of social cohesion.

From a theoretical and professional point of view, the study reaffirms the importance of Social Work as a critical mediator between the State and religious denominations, assuming a stance of active neutrality, defence of human rights, and valorisation of inter-religious dialogue. Ethics, secularism, and social justice thus emerge as central categories for professional practice in a context of growing pluralism.

It is recognised, however, that the absence of primary empirical data and the dependence on documentary sources constitute limitations of this work. Future research should deepen, through field studies, the real impact of State-church partnerships on the effectiveness of social policies, as well as assess the perception of the Social Work professionals involved in these dynamics.

Therefore, religious pluralism in Angola should not be seen as a threat to the state order, but as an opportunity for the democratic exercise of difference. The challenge is to build a model of regulation and cooperation that harmonises faith and citizenship, ensuring that the State, without abdicating its secularity, recognises in religions legitimate partners for the promotion of human dignity and social justice.

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APPENDIX A – Codebook for Content Analysis

Appendix A presents the codebook developed from the thematic content analysis conducted in this study. It was created to ensure methodological transparency and allow for the replication of analytical procedures, showcasing the thematic categories, coding criteria, and main sources used. This appendix synthesises the interpretive journey that underpinned the analysis of the relations between the State and religious pluralism in Angolan social policies.

Table A.1 – Thematic Categorisation of Documentary Analysis

Code	Thematic Category	Operational Definition	Example of Excerpt/Application in Article	Primary Source
REG-01	State Regulation	Actions and mechanisms by the State to register, oversee, or limit the activities of churches and religious denominations.	“The growth of unregistered churches poses challenges to effective regulation.”	Constitution of Angola (2010); Laureiro (n.d.); Jornal EMÉ (2025)
REG-02	Recognition Conflicts	Tensions caused by the exclusion or discrimination of religions of African origin or those not officially recognised.	“Some traditions, such as religions of African origin, continue to face difficulties in obtaining institutional recognition.”	Nicácio (2023); Fernando (2020)
LIB-01	Religious Freedom	Legal guarantees of religious practice and its relation to the principle of secularism.	“The Constitution of the Republic of Angola guarantees religious freedom and the secularity of the State.”	Constitution (2010); Mariano (2002)
LIB-02	Conflict between Dogma and Human Rights	Situations in which religious doctrines clash with rights of equality and citizenship.	“Religious dogmas have at times collided with rights such as gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights.”	Jesus (2025); Paulino (2021)
COP-01	Social Cooperation	Partnerships between the State and religious organisations in areas such as health, education, and social assistance.	“Churches have developed relevant social projects, especially in areas such as education and health.”	Vatican News (2023); Bobrzyk & Schoeninger (2024)
LAI-01	Secularism and State Neutrality	Institutional stance ensuring separation between State and religion and respect for denominational diversity.	“Religious groups have attempted to influence public policies, jeopardising the separation between Church and State.”	Brepohl (2016); Camuto (2025)
ETH-01	Ethics and Social Work	The social worker's stance in the face of religious diversity and challenges of social justice.	“Social Work professionals must ensure their interventions do not reproduce religious discrimination.”	Morais (2014); Monteiro (2020)

Methodological Note:

The codes were created after an initial reading of the documentary corpus and categorised around four main axes: 1) Regulation and Recognition (REG); 2) Freedom and Rights Conflicts (LIB); 3) Social Cooperation (COP); 4) Secularism and Public Ethics (LAI/ETH). The frequency and concurrence between categories were analysed qualitatively, guiding the discussion of results.

APPENDIX B – DOCUMENTARY CORPUS (Used)

Appendix B compiles the documentary corpus used in the research, consisting of legal, academic, and journalistic sources analysed between 2002 and 2025. Its inclusion aims to ensure the traceability of empirical evidence and demonstrate the methodological triangulation employed in the analysis. This set of documents served as the basis for constructing the thematic categories and for the critical interpretation of the tensions and complementarities between the State and religious organisations in Angolan social policies.

Table B.1 – Legal, Academic, and Journalistic Sources Analysed (2002–2025)

Source Type	Title/Author	Year	Description / Context of Use	URL / Complete Reference
Legal Document	Constituição da República de Angola	2010	Base jurídica da laicidade e liberdade religiosa.	DGSI - Constituição de Angola
Scientific Article	Fernando, M. (2020). Pluralismo, diversidade e trânsito religioso em Angola.	2020	Base teórica sobre pluralismo religioso angolano.	Periodikos
Book	Monteiro, A. (2020). Serviço social, Estado e políticas sociais em Angola.	2020	Fundamentação sobre Estado e política social.	Alexa Cultural
Academic Article	Brepohl, M. (2016). Estado laico e pluralismo religioso.	2016	Apoio teórico para laicidade e neutralidade estatal.	Dialnet
Media Report	Camuto, N. (2025). Líderes religiosos acusados de serem usados pelo Governo. DW África.	2025	Caso empírico de conflito político-religioso.	DW África
Report	Quiala, S. (2025). Angola: Estado laico ou regulador da fé?	2025	Debate sobre regulação estatal e liberdade religiosa.	DW África
Report	Lusa (2024). IURD: Ala angolana denuncia detenção de mais de 40 pastores.	2024	Exemplo de conflito entre Estado e Igreja.	DW África
Legal Article	Nicácio, C. (2023). Direito e tensões entre liberdade religiosa e diversidade.	2023	Apoio conceitual sobre discriminação religiosa.	SciELO Brasil
Religious Document	Vatican News (s/d). Angola – CEAST quer ações concretas na parceria Estado-Igrejas.	2023	Example of institutional cooperation between Church and State.	Vatican News

Complementary Methodological Note

- The corpus was analysed in light of the codebook categories, with annotations and comments in an analytical spreadsheet.
- Each source was cited in the text according to APA 7th edition standards and recorded in the bibliographic references.
- The set of sources ensures triangulation between normative, theoretical, and factual discourses.