

Religion and Crime: Exploring the Link towards Crime Prevention in Bungoma County, Kenya

¹Dr. Kathryn Langat, ²Rev. (Sgt. Rtd) Dr. Elijah Onyango
Standslause Odhiambo, ³Kiprop Evans

¹ Department of Social Work and Criminology
Kibabii University

² Department of Arts, Governance and Communication Studies
Bomet University College, Kenya

³ M.A Student - Department of Criminology
Kibabii University

ABSTRACT: Over the last five decades there has been growing interest in the nature of the relationship between religion and crime. In general, researchers have sought to determine if being more or less religious has anything to do with why people do or do not commit crime. Scholars from diverse disciplines, including criminologists and theologians interested in this line of inquiry have sought to provide empirical insights to this important question, however, the link between religion and crimes is debatable. Link between religion and crime remains an unsettled and controversial topic, because of different religious and cultural beliefs that exist globally and in the study area the gap is wide. The research objectives sought to establish whether the link between religion and crimes exist and usefulness of religion in crime prevention. One theory informed this study namely Social Control Theory. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design as appropriate because the research problem under investigation was descriptive in nature, appropriate for collecting, analyzing, and presenting the data. A sample size of 125 was derived from a target population of 1250 key respondents in Bungoma county where mixed research was applied. The research tools included In-depth Interviews, desk review, questionnaires, and Focus Group Discussion. Earlier findings indicated religion as crucial for maintaining social order and fostering a set of common values and beliefs in the society as a way of preventing crime. The study revealed an inverse link between religiosity and crime which suggests that religion is useful in suppressing criminality behavior. Where education sector especially schools sponsored by religious organizations, and presents of traditional churches, the vicinity recorded less crime in the neighbourhood. The study recommends the need for criminologist to factor in religion as one method to prevent crimes in the community.

KEYWORDS: Religion, Crime, Christianity, Extremism, Prevention

I. BACKGROUND

Over the last five decades there has been growing interest in the nature of the relationship between religion and crime. In general, researchers have sought to determine if being religious or not has anything to do with why people do or do not break the different types of law. Scholars from diverse disciplines, including criminologists and theologians interested in this line of inquiry have sought to provide empirical insights to this important question because often the link between religion and crimes is debatable. According to Travis (1990) he disputed and ignored the component of the role of religion in crime prevention. However, current studies have attracted a lot of attention because different types of religions have found their way into correctional facilities globally. For example, faith-based rehabilitation programmes in incarceration institutions have molded offenders to become reformed law-abiding citizens. Other offenders have reintegrated back to community as pastors teaching people about Christianity and Islam (Sullivan, 2009)

African culture which many times is confused with religion and culture, significantly prevented crimes committed. Many traditional cultures build on norms whereby it was wrong to kill or steal which the society abided by the community norms. Religion may be useful in explaining why people do or do not commit crime, but because religion may clarify why people engage in pro-social activities, criminologists have generally tended to ignore the role of religion in it. This paper brings out the importance to understand how religiosity keeps individuals from engaging in criminal behavior, but also significant is isolating the effects, if any, of faith-motivated individuals, groups, and organizations in fostering pro-social activities because pro-social behaviors decrease the probability of antisocial behaviors including crime. Studying and emphasizing Factors that

essentially keep people from breaking the law, advances understanding on the need of how to pursue crime prevention and factors attached to religion in crime prevention. Similarly, Travis Hirschi (1990) argues that there are very important reasons why people do not commit crime or engage in delinquent behavior when they are controlled by religion or societal beliefs. Religion, therefore, is but one of many factors that control or bond an individual to society without committing crimes. Indeed, it is easy to see how religion may play a central bonding role between attachments, commitments, involvements, and beliefs.

Therefore, Religion has always played a crucial role in defining society. Religion is at the foundations of individual and group identity. This role is because religion and religious leaders have historically been influential in setting moral, political and social agendas (Coogan, 2003). The central argument is that while religion could contribute to violence, like in the current contemporary society, Religion has played a more relevant and irreplaceable role in crimes prevention. Odhiambo (2014) in his article titled "Religious Fundamentalism & Terrorism" states that:

"The role of religion in society today is overestimated and that religion in essence is "really politics under a different name. This argument negates the deepest makeup and purpose of religion, namely that it is a search for human "roots" and meaning, and it provides "wings" to deeper, higher, beyond the limitations of suffering experiences to transcend everyday realities. This is not to deny that almost all religions have an extremely violent component as well. It is because religion cannot be separated from other spheres of human life (e.g. politics, culture). However, religion should not be treated as identical to other facets of human life. Because of the integrated nature of human life these different spheres do overlap or influence each other. In many cases religion is being implemented to influence political violence today and cannot be ignored or played down. Therefore, when the expression "religious terrorism" is used, the notion of political terrorism strongly complemented or inspired by religion is meant".

One of the major rehabilitation programmes in society and Kenya prisons is the faith based programmes. Despite faith-based programmes making a change in offenders who come out as better citizens, there exist doubts as to whether religion can prevent recidivist from repeating the same crime. The bone of contention is traced back to abolition of traditional African religion when Christianity was introduced in Kenya 1887. The first missionaries did not recognize African religion which held cultural norms on crime prevention. On the contrary, Bungoma county recorded presence of many religions and sects' respected religion. African religion played a key role in crime prevention because crimes committed in the community was addressed immediately with a fine.

Statement of the Problem: The study of religion and crime relationship goes back to the beginning of criminological thought. Nonetheless, religion has rarely been incorporated into major theories of crime and criminological research on crimes prevention. While religion may act as a form of self-control for crime prevention, it can also be argued that certain aspects of religion work as a form of social control as well. In examining religion as a form of crime prevention, social scientists typically point to the ways in which being a member of a religious community may exert positive influence over decisions and behaviors people engage in it. In this sense, control over certain behaviors in the society has more to do with meeting the expectations of the group and maintaining a connection to the group. It is understood that failing to adhere to certain community behaviors becomes a violation of the religious group's expectations. As a result, many communities guided by religious factors shy away from behaviors that are considered deviant, to avoid being ostracized by their society. In view of this background, the study sought to establish the link between religion and crimes and how religion can be used in preventing crimes and conflicts in the community.

Objectives

This research study was guided by the following two objectives to:

- Establish the link between religion and crimes
- Assess the usefulness of religion role in crime prevention

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sometimes, religion has been abused and disputed as a crime prevention, this literature section addresses what is religion, religion extremism. The section winds up with social learning theory.

What is religion?

To understand the context of religion and crime, it is important to define what is religion. The definition of religion is varied concept in itself however, "religion is a social arrangement designed to provide a shared, collective way of dealing with the unknown and unknowable aspects of human life, death and existence, and the difficult dilemmas that arise in the process of making moral decisions. Religion not only provides responses to enduring human problems and questions but also forms a basis for social cohesion and solidarity (Hanes, 2013).

Religion and the Crime-Terror Nexus

Sometimes, religion has been blamed for cause of crimes. That is why when a group of people decide to put men's beliefs aside and follow a religion or a deity of their own, conflict emerges. Sometimes religion contributes to violence since some religions teach the concept of self-sacrifice such as suicide bombers who kill instantly hundreds of people. Constant attacks by Al-Shabaab on Kenya and Somalia is corroborated by Odhiambo *et al* (2014) article entitled "Al-Shabaab Terrorists Propaganda & the Kenya government Response"

"The communicative action of Al-Shabaab terrorism toward Kenya tends to spread fear, distort normal modes of behavior, generate insecurity, and stir hostility and distrust toward Islam. These are the most evident effects of its violent actions. But several subtle and dangerous others must be emphasized: to undermine the support that a population gives to leaders; to sow doubt on the capacity of the government to protect its population; and, especially, to spread the feeling of self-guilt among those receiving terrorist assaults. Therefore, there is a double objective: to terrify and delegitimize"

Within religion there exists religious extremist groups that engage in premeditated acts of violence for religious and/or ideological ends. It is done with the intention of inflicting harm on the civilian population, intimidate the public, and coercing government or state compliance with the goals of the perpetrator (Johns & Jang, 2012). Extremist groups are more commonly referred to as terrorist groups. When thinking about criminal groups and their association with religion, religious extremist groups are generally the first that come to mind, which is why these groups are more closely associated with religiousness. Instead, these groups term themselves more spiritual, rather than religious.

Singling out one religion, as the sole perpetrator of terror would be to distort historical records and contemporary reality, as well as to misjudge the extent and the complex nature of the problem of terrorism. According to Agbibo (2014), there are currently numerous conflicts in different parts of the world in which "adherents of all the major world faiths can be involved thereby justifying atrocities on the grounds that their cause is righteous". All of them hold in common the belief that those who die defending their religious objectives and values are martyrs. According to Haynes (2013), consequences of conflicts associated with religion have been destructive because they are dogmatic and hard to resolve.

Religion and Crime in Kenya Perspective: Theocratic States exist in 21st century for example, Saudi Arabia religion rules the ways of the country, and if one is not a part of it, one's own life would be in danger. There are many countries in the world where religion faces persecution. If this research was carried out in MENA countries, the link between crimes and religion could differ because the punishment subjected to stealing is cutting off one hand. Kenya is one of the countries domiciled by Christians, Islam, and other different types of African traditional religion. Religious conflicts are not so profound unless only instigated by terrorists which create a wedge between Christians and Muslims. Similarly, Christian religion have different sects which are associated with cultism and mixture of contemporary religion and traditional religion. According to Hoskin *et al* (2017) it has become difficult to explain the thin line between religion and crimes committed due to heresy teachings. In Kenya, different religion sects have taken a high notch on matters to do with cultism and emergence of "churchpreneur." Religious leaders have amassed influence, large congregations, and considerable personal wealth by monetizing religious belief among their followers (ICIS, 2019). Differentiating religiosity and crimes some religious leaders and members have become conduits of criminal activities.

Contemporary religion factions are emerging such as atheist, who does not believe in the existence of any deity or supernatural forces. While some describe themselves as “agnostic”, which means that they acknowledge the possibility of a supernatural reality, there are others who describe themselves as being non-religious but spiritual in other ways. The religious believe that religiosity has positive benefits and should be fostered even if it is fallacious (Brauer et al 2013). The religious exhibit bias against atheists. However according to Zuckerman (2014) shows that atheists and agnostics, are actually less likely to commit crime.

Africa religion has traditionally served as a method for bonding individuals with their families, communities, and societies, conveying societal goals and instilling morals in young and old alike. The religious bond not only families and communities together through common beliefs and rituals, it provides a moral compass which can act as an internal social control, preventing individuals from engaging in antisocial behaviors, like crime (Adamczyk et al, 2017). According to Aldridge (2013), contemporary African religion and crimes are less regarded as necessary in upholding morals in society due to influence of new technology and globalization. However, religion involvement in community activity may prevent crimes.

Social Control Theory: This study was guided by social control theory (Hirschi, 1990) where by religious involvement constrains criminal behavior although religiosity may operate as a shield against negative behaviors such as crime among religious people. This theory was found fit to explain the two variables whether religion can prevent crimes. According to Hirschi, decisions to commit crimes were linked with perceptions of pleasure and pain on earth, instead of perceived heavenly rewards for good behavior or the punishment of hellfire for sinful acts. Despite landmark on Hirschi theory, he was criticized by Benda and Corwyn (1997) that moral make-up of the community in different set up explains why religiosity did not reduce crime in the original study. Benda and Corwyn argue why some areas with high religiosity, crime was on the increase. Grasmick (2006) is in agreement with Hirschi theory that higher levels of religious commitment directly reduced the likelihood of criminal activities even after accounting for individuals’ level of self-control. Baier and Wright (2001) was of different opinion that religion had a “moderate” effect on reductions in crimes but not total reduction as Hirschi social theory narrates.

Methodology: The study adopted a survey design to describe the existing research concern by asking individuals about their perceptions, attitudes, and values or through observation. This study assessed the nexus between religion and crimes prevention in Bungoma County. The instruments used in primary data collection were questionnaires, structured interviews, document analysis and direct observation on individuals who lived in Bungoma County and were knowledgeable about religion and crime patterns in the study area. Target population was 1250 a total of 10% was used to arrive at 125 number of respondents.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Under specific objective one of this study, the respondents were asked to respond whether there is nexus between religion that prevented people from committing crimes in Bungoma County. Figure 1 present the findings.

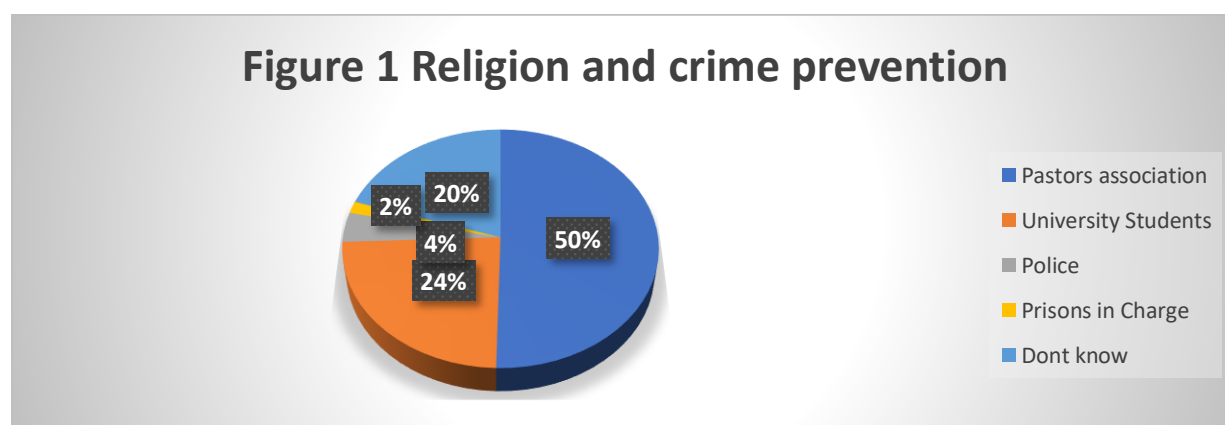


Figure 1 Nexus between religion and crime prevention
Source: Field data, 2021

The results in figure 1 indicated that out of the 125 respondents interviewed, Pastor's Association 50% alluding that there is a nexus between religion and crimes. Although, Figure 1 indicated mixed findings, 24% of university students stated religion is positively associated with crimes while police 4% and prison officers 2%. A total of 20% indicated don't know whether there exists a nexus between religion and crimes. The findings portray similar findings with that of Researchers who made significant contributions to this emerging contemporary religion and crime which lacked consensus about the nature of this relationship between religion and crime. Pastors Association alluded there is a correlation between crime and religion since the probability of crime in the county being committed by staunch church members are less likely to commit crime than their less religious people. On the contrary, the finding differs with current debates in Kenya on religiosity and crime. According to Odhiambo, (2014), Kenyans, like millions of Christians and Muslims in Africa and elsewhere, are susceptible to religious abuse especially the youths. Odhiambo argues contemporary religiosity has been invaded, by violent extremism, radicalization, cultism, commercialization with heresy teachings. The 20% "don't know" alluded the difficulty in establishing the link due to the increase in crime despite over 100 churches existing in the county. According to University students 24% alluded that religion and crime are intertwined through socialization which can either lead one to be radicalized by fundamentalist religious factions or religion can change an individual's level of religious commitment through positive reinforcement. The students cited intimidation from contemporary religions which force them to get saved if they do not, they are threatened with everlasting fire. Some religions promise the youths pocket money if they join violent extremism which drives the youths to commit crimes. Brauer et al, (2013), questioned "does religion suppress or soothe? Going by the findings, it can be concluded religion can deter crime through practicing a high level of morality in the society. Also, if religion practice goes down, crimes are perceived to increase a finding Cullen (2012) agrees.

Usefulness of religion in crime prevention: objective two assessed whether religion was useful in crime prevention. The results are recorded below.

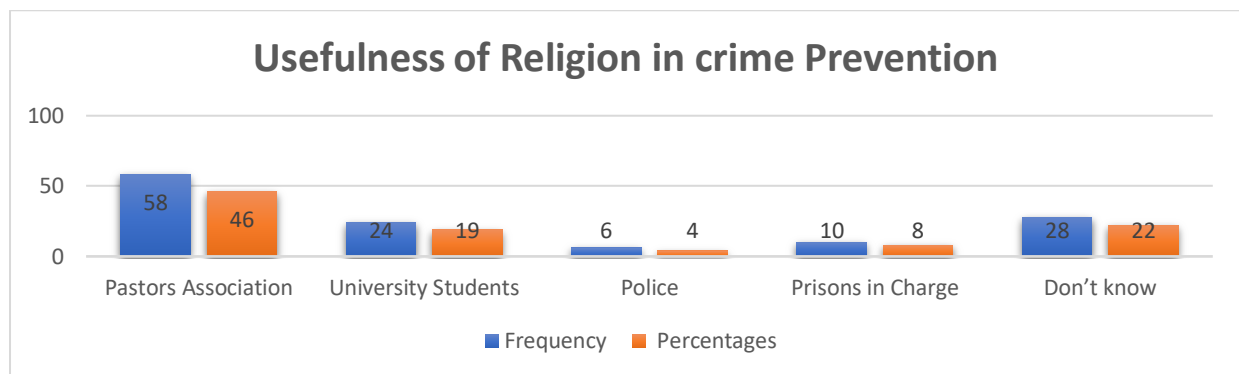


Figure 2 Usefulness of Religion in crime Prevention
Source: Field data, 2021

According to Figure 2, 46% of pastor's association alluded that religion is useful in crime prevention while university students recorded 19%. According to Police officers 4% while prison officers 8% recorded lowest ratings in percentage. Another 22% stated don't know. Prison officers were probed further as to why they viewed religion as not useful in crime prevention, they attested that Faith based programmes exist as rehabilitation programming in prisons however, majority of the inmates hide in religion as a reason for early parole through recommendation of parole board and secondly, to influence for improved living conditions inside prison. According to Sullivan (2009) incarcerated inmates participate in religious programs for a "psychological crutch" where the practice of religion may enhance self-esteem and good feelings, while inside prison. Increase of 22% by those who stated don't know, would be interesting to examine whether there is existence of external factors which could have influenced the study. According to Benda et al (2001), religiosity prevents one from committing crime while other contributing factors such as people turning to seek more stimulating activities, to avoid crimes. It can be concluded that, only the pastor's association was confident that religion was useful in crime prevention as opposed to the police and prison officers who were of the opinion, that religion alone cannot prevent crime, but other factors such as incarceration play a key role in crime prevention a similar view alluded by Hoskin et al (2017). Interesting finding from the prison officers and police was the fact that atheists were less likely to commit crimes compared to those who are identified by religion.

IV. KEY FINDINGS

- I. This study established existencelink between religion and crimes. Religion deters individual to commit crime because of threats of supernatural punishment. Some religionspractice an “eye for an eye” punishment that means no one committed a crime because fear is instilled. The study area with presence of religious churches or mosques around in up country set up, recorded low crime rate compared to some urban towns and markets. The traditional churches deterred people from committing crimes. Therefore, religion helps to provide values that direct behavioral change in crime prevention.
- II. Under objective two, this study faced difficulty in concluding that religion is useful in crime prevention as it established that religion sometimes causes crime-related outcomefrom religious extremism and cultism. It is evident from the findings that religion may influence the criminal offending. This study revealed that the higher levels of religious involvement in the community are less likely to engage in criminal acts while the lessparticipation inreligion and its activities are vulnerable to committing crimes.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

On the strength of the summary of the findings and conclusions made in foregone sections, the following recommendations are put forward

- A. There is need to examine the dimensions of religiosity to understand the nexus with crimes because religion is relatively significance in crime prevention. Testing different measures of “religiosity” will help to develop a better theoretical understanding of the nexus between religion and crime acts in prevention it is a high time religion is considered as a tool for crime prevention. In terms of prevention, churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues could develop programs to target emerging crimes, by offering guidance and support.
- B. Both society, different religions especially the faith-based organizations ought to incorporate set of attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, and values that condemn criminal activity in their activities since religion is a creation of members of the society. There is need to examine the long-term effects of ‘religiosity’ especially when the prevalence of risky practices such violent extremism, radicalization, cultism delegitimizes the functional aspect of religion on criminality leads to reduction of risk of crime in later adulthood criminality. This study proposes a theoretical model that can be used to examine religion and crime issues since leading Criminology textbooks have tended to overlook the role of religion in understanding the etiology of crime.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, being part of religious groupsand institutions that shape the normative morality can instill internal social controls, by preventing individuals from engaging in criminal behaviors.

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