

# Covid-19 and its Impact on Religiosity: Reflections on Religious Life and Practice in Uganda

Alexander P. Isiko  
alexisiko@yahoo.com

## Abstract

The Coronavirus Disease of 2019 (Covid-19) has been a trending academic research topic since 2020. Globally, numerous treatises on the relation between religion and Covid-19 exist with scholars inclined on religious explanatory models of the disease and its impact on religious practices. This has been counterfactual for Uganda, with immense scholarly attention devoted to analyzing the impact of the pandemic on socio-economic variables. Uganda, being a highly religious nation, provides an ideal case study as classical theoretical postulations stand firm on a positive sustained correlation between religiosity and natural disasters. Using the postmodernist innovative qualitative approach and unconventional 'remote' research methods of data collection due to the biting restrictive Covid-19 measures, the study established that this virus variably impacted religiosity. Those hitherto religious became stauncher and more stalwart. The former religiously unenthusiastically forsook religious routines. The pandemic containment measures revolutionized the long-standing religious practices and traditions, which necessitated the adoption of and adapting to fresh forms of religious expression.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Coronavirus, religiosity, religious practice, Uganda, devotionalism

## Introduction

This article analyses the impact of Covid-19 on the religious life and practice of Ugandans. Uganda, a multi-religious nation, has 99.8percent of the citizens

subscribing to one of the tripartite religious heritages of Christianity, Islam, and African indigenous beliefs (UBOS 2016; Isiko 2019:102). Catholicism dominates with 40 percent, followed by Anglicans, Muslims, Pentecostal Christians, and other religious groups comprising 32, 14, 11, and four percent respectively (UBOS 2016). Perspectives from the four dominant religious groups informed this survey. Before the virus' emergence, Uganda boasted with over 86 percent of its citizens devoted to religion. 82 percent of Ugandans, the second highest in the whole world, attended religious services weekly, hence rating seventh of 105 countries being surveyed. 67 percent of Ugandans observed daily prayers (Hackett, Kramer, & Fahmy 2018:14).

Besides the quantitative measure of Uganda's religiosity, there are tangible qualitative indicators too. Uganda's religious spaces, particularly churches and mosques gather more than political and socio-economic conferences. Clerics are more respected than politicians (Alava & Ssentongo 2016:678). Preaching is commonplace on the streets. In spite of Uganda lacking a state religion, its national motto, 'For God and my country', alludes to the country's exceptional relationship with the spiritual (Isiko 2019:103). Sunday is a designated holiday for the worship of the 'Christian God'. Out of the 16 designated annual national public holidays, nine are religious based. The public expression of religious beliefs is mostly verbally and through art. Official national celebrations of political nature are preceded by clergy-led prayers. The greeting of *Assalam aleikum* (*peace be upon you*) and exaltation of Jesus is almost obligatory among Muslims and Christians respectively. By legislation, Ugandans are required to take an official 'oath', holding either the Bible or Quran up high (ULII 2000). Physical articles of religious faiths like rosaries, the cross, the Bible, and Quran are displayed in public offices, living rooms, and vehicles.

However, the emergence of Covid-19 necessitated a shift in the routine with immense implications on religious behavior. The containment measures of the virus entailed the prohibition of congregational prayers and subsequent shutdowns of places of worship, travel bans, and curfews, which impacted on the expression of religious faith (Newport 2020). This change is an affirmation of a sociological theory which postulates a correlation between religiosity and natural disasters. The theory contends that people in areas frequently razed by natural calamities, practice religion more (Bentzen 2013:30; 2020:2 of 12; Sibley & Bulbulia 2012:2-3 of 10). Indeed, with specific reference to pandemics, people with top-class religious convictions are favorably

placed to have their religiousness being bettered by a pandemic than the less staunch (Sahgal & Connaughton 2021: 9 of 19). The Covid-19 pandemic in Uganda therefore provides an opportunity for scholars of religion to analyze and verify claims of the nexus of natural disasters and religiosity.

## **Uganda in the Context of Covid-19**

Covid-19 is a viral infection caused by a ‘severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2’ (SARS-CoV-2). The virus spreads from an infected person’s mouth or nose in small liquid droplets when they cough, sneeze, sing, speak, or breathe, or when the victim is in contact with contaminated surfaces before touching their open facial parts. The spread rate is sky-rocketed by a prolonged stay in crowded settings (WHO 2020b). Covid-19 allegedly started in the Chinese town of Wuhan in December 2019 (Shereen, Khan, Kazmi, Bashir, & Siddique 2020:92; Guo, Cao, Hong, Tan, Chen, Jin, & Yan 2020:2 of 10; Zu, Jiang, Xu, Chen, Ni, Lu, & Zhang 2020:E15; Isiko 2020a:77). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic after cases were reported in 114 countries (WHO 2020a). In the case of Uganda, the President addressed the nation on March 18, 2020 with a host of preventive measures (Museveni 2020a:4-17 of 19). It included the indefinite suspension of all religious gatherings, recommending home and online prayers, regular hand washing, embracing scientific weddings and burials, the imposition of a 7:00 pm curfew, and caution against shaking hands.

In all the measures, the covet objective was to decongest risk hotspots from the spread of the virus. Iran, for example, had forbidden pilgrims to visit the Islamic shrine in Qom. In Malaysia, the Tablighi gathering at a Muslim mosque in Kuala Lumpur was also forbidden. Similar Tablighi gatherings were stopped in Pakistan and India. In South Korea, a Christian congregation at the Shincheonji church was prohibited to gather, while Saudi Arabia swiftly called off the pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina (Quadri 2020:220; Wildman, Bulbulia, Sosis, & Schjoedt 2020:115). In Uganda, the announcement of Covid-19 preventive measures preceded consultations with various religious leaders (Isiko 2020a:78).

In his maiden address on Covid-19, the President of Uganda referred to God three times, admonishing citizens to heed to God-given human intellect to act against the virus, observing God’s mercy upon Uganda, and calling

upon citizens to pray for God's intervention against the virus (Museveni 2020a:7 of 19). This provides insurmountable evidence about Uganda's resolve to tackle the pandemic, based on its religious stances. However, not much has been written on the impact of this pandemic on Uganda's rich religious heritage, life, and practice. Enormous scholarly attention came from the natural sciences, with a sociological analysis and studies on the impact of the pandemic upon socio-economic variables taking center stage. The limited scholarly work on religion in Uganda has been on religious explanatory models for Covid-19 and the relevance of religiousness to fight against the pandemic (Isiko 2020a; Echoru, Kasozi, Michael, Ssempijja, Emmanuel, Mujinya, Ajambo, Matama, Monima, John, Aruwa, Kegoye, Okeniran, Adeoye, Archibong, Viola, Henry, Onongha, & Welburn 2020). On the contrary, this article does not glorify religion as a springboard for combating Covid-19 in a society with deep religious roots. Rather, the pandemic is presented as a modulating factor of religious life and practice in Uganda.

## **Literature Review**

Globally, there has been keen scholarly interest in tracing the footprints of Covid-19 on religiosity. A study in the United States revealed that the pandemic has improved the religious faith of the American people (Sahgal & Connaughton 2021:6 of 19). In Belgium and Indonesia, Covid-19 related lockdowns gravely altered religious practices and routines with numerous believers yearning for substitute possibilities and modalities aimed at religious continuity (Huygens 2021:1 of 10; Syahrul, Hamdika, & Sholahuddin 2020:273). In Poland, Colombia, and the Philippines, religious practices intensified (Sulkowski & Ignatowski 2020:7 of 15; Boguszewski, Makowska, Bozewicz, & Podkowinska 2020:8 of 14; Del Castillo, Del Castillo, & Corpuz 2021:2297; Meza 2020:224-228). In Greece and other dominant Orthodox Christian countries in Eastern Europe, the pandemic also impacted on social manifestations of religiosity, taking a toll on the spiritual life of believers (Papazoglou, Moysidis, Tsagkaris, Dorosh, Karagiannidis, & Mazin 2021:1 of 13). Other scholars have analyzed the technological innovations that religious organizations embraced amidst strict combative measures of social distancing (Pillay 2020:268; Ge, Sainz, Gore, & Epps 2021:10 of 16; Parish 2020:2 of 13).

In Africa, more attention has been given to the impact of Covid-19 upon socio-economic variables like mental and reproductive health, education, disability, and gender-based violence than religious practice. Nonetheless, there is some scholarly literature on the impact of the pandemic on religiosities from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya (Sibanda, Muyambo, & Chitando 2022; Udok, Eton, & Akpanika 2020; Osei-Tutu, Afram, Mensah-Sarbah, Dzokoto, & Adams 2021; Omopo 2021; Chukwuma 2021; Sambu, Kweingoti, Cherotich, & Salimin 2021:9 of 18). An internet search for any scholarly work on the impact of the pandemic on religious practices in Uganda was futile, with the exception of studies in which religion was used as a variable of analysis of the people's understanding of Covid-19 (Isiko 2020a; Echoru *et al.* 2020). It is therefore a novel task to establish and analyze how much change the pandemic could have brought to a country with unquestionably high levels of religiosity like Uganda.

In spite of the numerous studies on religiosity, there is no consensus on the precise definition of this concept (Bergan & McConatha 2001:24; Holdcroft 2006:89; Paraschiva & Nicoleta 2011:354). The tolerable opinion though is that religiosity is a multi-dimensional concept (Cornwall, Albrecht, Cunningham, & Pitcher 1986:226). This is rooted in the variant comprehension of religion, based on the diversity of theories of religion (Pearce, Hayward, & Pearlman 2017:3). There are, however, three conventional denominators of religiosity: Religious beliefs and identity; religious activities; and personal religious practice, also known as 'devotionalism' (Mathur 2012:85; Pearce *et al.* 2017:4-5). The last aspect involves one's individual religious behavior, thus requiring a level of personal dedication. These dimensions of religiosity are not so distinct (Bjarnason 2007:350; Cornwall *et al.* 1986:227).

Marcus (n.d.) argues that whereas beliefs may reveal a person's or group's understanding about the ultimate nature of deities or the universe, behavior involves acting in a certain way as an individual or in a group. Whereas in sociological terms, religious identity has a lot to do with membership to a religious denomination, the concept of belonging carries a stronger affective dimension than mere self-identification with a religious tradition (Oostveen 2019:2 of 10). Covid-19 dictates research concerning 'stay-home', self-isolation, the imposition of curfews, and the total shutdown of places of worship which have incapacitated religiosity studies along the conventional tenets of membership and religious attendance. This has necessitated the creativity of researchers to uncover and study elements beyond membership

and attendance, depicting people's religiosity during those unique circumstances. Religious clerics, involved in the study assessed the alteration in religiosity of the faithful and self, based on their own parameters which offer a sense of belonging (Campbell & Coles 1973:153).

The challenge with previous studies on religiosity though, is their preoccupation with quantitative analyses (Cornwall *et al.* 1986:233-241; Bentzen 2020:7-9 of 12; 2013:10-30 of 40; Bergan & McConatha 2001:28-29). All dimensions of religiosity have been a subject of quantitative measurement on a scale which renders most studies on the personal and affective relationship with the spiritual defective (Koenig, Al Zaben, Khalifa, & Shohaib 2014:533). This is because devotionism or individual feelings of one's religiosity are better understood by observing and analyzing religious behavior and emotions rather than statistical measurements (Głaz 2021:577). Yet still, quantitative studies on religiosity have been associated with research results which are not entirely consistent because of null findings and even negative associations. This is due to variations in subjects and contextual characteristics (Zwingmann, Klein, & Büssing 2011:346). This article is therefore a purely qualitative presentation and analysis of religious clerics' views and the author's personal experiences of the effect of Covid-19 upon religious lives, beliefs and belonging, practices and devotion.

## **Methodology**

In this article, the author abandons a positivist epistemological approach and embraces a postmodernism approach. The author was dependent on clerics' personal perspectives of religiosity and his own, rather than pre-determined dimensions and standardized tools of religiosity. Postmodernism has proved to be the ideal approach to anchor the study because it values the subjective and multiple opinions rather than predetermined rules for action. It assigns value to multiple meanings rather than being the single, authoritative voice of the expert researcher. Using his vantage point as an academic of religious-theological studies at a higher institution of learning and a critical participating observer of Christian religious practices, the author makes critical analyses of the shift in the religious behavior of Ugandans amidst the pandemic.

To enhance the credibility and validity of research findings, the author held 'interactive interviews' with eight religious clerics, choosing two

from each of the four significant religious groups, who owing to their training and professional practice would be able to discern religious behavior. The robust engagement was facilitated by the fact that the author and religious clerics were acquaintances, hence innovative and flexible alternative interview formats were used (cf. Baker, Marti, Braunstein, Whitehead, & Yukich 2020:366). These included WhatsApp, Facebook, ordinary phone interviews, and short messaging (SMS) applications to have ‘chat interviews’. The author found this to be the best approach because the pandemic made it difficult to use ‘traditional’ vital methods and tools of studying religion (Dowson 2020:42). Interviewees’ names are withheld due to anonymity but are identified as ‘Religious Cleric’ followed by their religious denomination.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The study revealed that Covid-19 and the associated containment measures had both a positive and negative impact on the religiosity of Ugandans. Religiously staunch Ugandans prior to the outbreak of the pandemic got more devoted albeit with constraints to practice it fully. Those with loose commitments prior to the pandemic abandoned their religious practices. Evidence and an analysis of the above is presented under the following four thematic areas: Religious belonging; religious practices and events; devotionalism; and innovations for religious life and practice. It will be discussed below.

### **Religious Belonging**

This is a sense of religious desire beyond membership to a religious tradition. Religious belonging presented here is similar to what Bimbo Omopo appropriates as religious conviviality in his analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on religious practices in Nigeria (Omopo 2021:7). The notion of religious belonging, just like conviviality relates to aspects of social interaction and cohesion, producing a form of shared life, a strong sense of togetherness, and mutual aid among members of the same religious community, despite other socio-economic differences (Omopo 2021:7). The precise question to be answered here is, How did the pandemic and its restrictions affect the religious belonging of Ugandans? For the first two years of the subsistence of the pandemic, the country was in total lockdown for a combined number of 10

months. During the total lockdown, there was a total shutdown of places of worship and a complete ban on congregational worship. In addition, there was a continued restriction of overnight prayers (Museveni 2020b; 2021a).

The closure of places of worship negated people's association with religion. Both the church (the building itself) and mosque are representations of God's presence at least in a nominal sense. Because congregational worship on Sundays and Fridays epitomizes the Christian and Islamic identity, the shutdown antagonized a strong belief in the obligation to attend Sunday and Friday meetings for Christians and Muslims respectively (Sulkowski & Ignatowski 2020:5-6 of 15). Their closure made the religiously staunch appear no different from the non-religious who desert worship places. Traditional public prayer days ordinarily identify the kind of religion that a Ugandan belongs to. The complete ban on congregational prayers curtailed this kind of religious entitlement.

During the relaxation of Covid-19 measures, the government encouraged Christians and Muslims to hold scientific prayers, either involving the physical attendance of congregants less than 200 members or to go entirely virtual (Museveni 2021c:6 of 12). The guidelines further restricted the vulnerable from attending congregational worship, hence denying them the opportunity to express their faith together with other members. The closure of Sunday schools and *Madrassa* for Christians and Muslims respectively denied children the opportunity to be nurtured into their religious traditions (Religious Cleric 11, Pentecostal Church, WhatsApp chat Interview, Kampala).

The pandemic disorganized the 'cell ministry' and 'fellowship groups' common with Urban Anglican and neo-Pentecostal churches in Uganda. 'Cell ministry' involves Christians within close proximity, holding informal prayer meetings at regular intervals in each member's home. 'Fellowship groups' are small Christian groups usually based on the unique social, economic, ethnic, and religious standing of members. 'Fellowships' and 'cell groups' fill the void when members are unable to congregate in church buildings. These groups help to preserve religious identity and fellowship with each other (Kwon, Ebaugh, & Hagan 1997:248). Contrary to the Nigerian experience as articulated by Omopo (2021:16-17), in Uganda the ban on all forms of religious gatherings and the personal dread to contract the virus incapacitated the functioning of the fellowship groups and cell ministry. Whereas some fellowships and cell groups met in secrecy, the Covid-19 infection of one member kept other members away from subsequent meetings.



Fellowship and Cell members who contracted the disease were stigmatized. Only worship at household level remained functional. Ordinary churchgoers became terrified of their previously revered religious clerics. This affected some conventional and revered Christian traditions, for example hugging and kissing the Bishop's ring (Religious Cleric 11, Pentecostal Church, WhatsApp chat Interview, Kampala).

The pandemic and its collateral restrictions disorganized the sustained Christian and Muslim identities through mandatory prayer reforms which undermined the performed theology (Stenschke 2018:158). Prayer in the context of group interaction ritually embodies and dramatizes the understandings of the community (Fuist 2015:533). A Muslim cleric emphasized the significance of collective prayer to religious identity in the following words:

The gathering of Muslims for prayer and other such religious practices clearly identifies them as people of one faith. Muslims are expected to pray five times a day in a congregational style along with the mandatory Friday *Jumah* prayers. The strict observance of prayer demonstrates the level of commitment to one's faith which lures non-Muslims to convert. Hence, Covid-19 has constrained the spread of Islam (Religious Cleric 1, Islamic faith, Phone Interview, Kampala).

In order to redefine and reassert themselves as distinct religious communities, religious clerics initiated a religious campaign in July 2020 dubbed 'I can't breathe', to protest the continued closure of places of worship (Kalema 2020). Some religious clerics sought for a court redress in order to manifest their faith (Kigongo & Wesaka 2021). Interviewees reported that they were nostalgic about a sense of belonging and religious intimacy.

## **Religious Practices and Events**

Religious practices are hereby defined as activities and rituals that are engaged in a routine as expression of beliefs and faith. On one hand, religious practices of Muslims are enshrined in the five pillars of Islam as well as the derivation from the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Christians are bound by their sacramental life instituted by Jesus Christ. The sacramental

life of the (Catholic) church includes a member's fulfilment of the baptism, confirmation, penance, praying for the sick, Holy Eucharist, holy matrimony, and ordination (Norman & Reiss 2020:3). Religious events are commemorations of the major spiritual milestones of a religious denomination. Religious practices have a direct impact on personal devotion, while religious events demonstrate the religiousness of members as a social category.

According to religious clerics, the non-fulfilment of the sacramental life for Christians and pillars of Islam for Muslims affected the level of religious commitment (Religious Cleric 7, Catholic Church, Interview; Religious Cleric 2, Islamic faith, Interview). To the Christians, sacraments are viewed as transformative. Therefore, to be deprived of it, no matter the reasons, is deeply disruptive (Norman & Reiss 2020:11). In the Ugandan setting, churches were deprived of the opportunity to baptize new converts, a public ritual whether by sprinkling or immersion in water. This means that for a combined 10 months during the first two years of the subsistence of the pandemic, no church admitted new members.

Prayers for the sick and the dead, as well as the celebration of religious marriages were grossly affected. Prayers for the sick and the dead are mandatory practices among Uganda's religious elite and followers. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, the anointing of the sick is one of the seven sacraments that are guarded jealously. In Protestant churches, there are prescribed liturgical prayers for the ailing and the deceased. In Islam, there are prescribed practices for burying the dead, all conducted in a congregational format. Unfortunately, the ban on congregating paused these practices. Covid-19 standard operating procedures (SOPs) restricted burials to core relatives. With the actual disposal of Covid-19 fatalities, the Muslim burial was restricted to health personnel with approved personal protective equipment (PPEs). According to clerics, they were proscribed from blessing the dead body and praying for the grieving relatives (Religious Cleric 4, Islamic faith, Interview, Masindi). Religious clerics who were previously central in the burial rite, stood quite distant from the Covid-19 cadaver at the funeral.

The grieving relatives remained unsure of the spiritual fate of their deceased relatives. Muslim burial rites dictate fellow Muslims to be in charge of the process to ensure the utmost observance of all rituals for the deceased to be granted peace in *Jannah*. However, during the lockdowns, health personnel substituted Muslim clerics. The restrictions on the number of mourners denied the living Muslims their spiritual rewards (Religious Cleric 3, Is-

lamic faith, Interview, Kampala). The urge to uphold burial rites as per Islamic traditions gave birth to a pioneer Muslim Funeral Services Firm at Uganda Muslim Supreme Council-Kibuli in November 2020 to observe both the government directives and the Muslim burial practices (Kamurungi 2021).

Relatedly, the sacrament of praying for the sick and souls of the deceased in Christian circles were endangered by the contagiousness of the virus. In this sacrament, there are three practices involved: The confession of one's sins to the priest (Macaraan 2021:e531) which was made difficult due to the freezing of both private and public transport; the anointing of the sick with oil smeared on the forehead, palms, and feet of the sick by the priest; and offering the sacrament of Holy Communion to the sick. However, the tradition of sharing wine and bread right from the hand of the clergy was thought a possible medium for Covid-19 transmission. Catholic Priests declared that they hesitated to anoint the suspected sick especially in the villages. A Priest said: 'Someone asked me to go and pray for a very sick person within my parish a stone's throw away, but I declined due to my uncertainty about the patient's Covid-19 status. I dreaded risking the parishioners' health (Religious Cleric 8, Catholic Church, Interview, Jinja Diocese).

Among other reforms by the Catholic Church in Uganda, the customary use of confession boxes was banned, dictating the practice to take place outdoor or in a well-ventilated indoor space as long as the sacramental seal was safely guarded. There was to be a two-meter distance between the priest and the penitent facing in the same direction. However, the church ruled out confession by telephone and internet based technology (The Independent 2021). The effectiveness of these sacraments and practices is thought to require the effective mediation of the clergy, for which they were constrained. This led to diminishing faith levels, rendering clerics irrelevant.

In addition to the non-observance of religious burial rites, the pandemic affected the celebration of religious marriages in Uganda. Whereas weddings were initially suspended for 32 days from March 20, 2020, the suspension was later lifted, but still with a restricted number of attendees (Museveni 2021b:19 of 23), contrary to the multitudes which partly characterize pomp during non-pandemic days. Specifically, Muslim clerics indicated that in Islam, the marriage ceremony, also called *Nikah* is expected to be massively witnessed (Religious Cleric 3, Islamic faith, Interview, Kampala). The celebratory style of religious marriages in Uganda during the pandemic birthed the concept of 'scientific marriages' (Museveni 2020a:10 of 19). In Uganda's

context, a ‘scientific marriage’ refers to a minimally attended marriage event where the standard operating procedures for Covid-19 are observed. These restrictions on weddings discern the spiritual from the nominal followers of faiths. During the restrictions, the staunch wedded albeit these restrictions. On the other hand, the less committed postponed their weddings, anticipating many attendees in the post-Covid-19 era.

The requirement for ‘social distancing’ to ensure a physical distance of at least two meters from each other meant that the clergy had to preside over the marriage while unprecedentedly distance themselves from the couple. This brought a feeling of spiritual deficiency among the wedded couple (Religious Cleric 5, Church of Uganda, Interview; Religious Cleric 10, Pentecostal Church, Interview, Kampala). Such restrictions resulted into fewer marriages being celebrated than before the pandemic. At the Busoga Anglican Diocese Cathedral – Bugembe, the number of monthly weddings dwindled from about 10 to only one or two in a month (Religious Cleric 5, Church of Uganda, Interview).

The case was not any different in the Roman Catholic Church in Uganda that hardly wedded people during the lockdown periods (Religious Cleric 8, Catholic Church, Interview, Jinja Diocese). Clerics believed that the restrictions on weddings kept people in fornication and cohabitation – two sinful acts that reduce one’s spirituality and favor before God (Religious Cleric 7, Catholic Church, Interview; Religious Cleric 3, Islamic faith, Interview, Kampala). Fewer wedded persons not only meant a smaller number of individuals who qualified to stand as godparents for those to receive baptism and confirmation, but also lessened the number of people to partake in the Holy Communion, as the wedding confers that right upon a person. The Covid-19 restrictions on weddings boosted civil marriages instead (Muhumuza & Mutsaka 2021). This was attributed to the need to circumvent the ordeals that Ugandans bear when preparing religious marriages. This category of Ugandans found in these restrictions a scapegoat to avoid societal and religious pressures that punctuate religious weddings (Muhumuza & Mutsaka 2021).

Other religious practices and events that were foregone due to Covid-19 include the ordination of clergy, religious pilgrimages, the canonization of religious clerics, and the commemoration of annual religious days, being at the core of the beliefs of specific religious groups. Several Anglican and Roman Catholic dioceses were not able to ordain deserving priests and Bishops.

Specifically, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Jinja never held any ordination since the nationwide lockdown of March 2020. The Episcopal Consecration of Rt. Rev. Raphael P'Mony Wokorach, M.C.C.J. Bishop elect of Nebbi Diocese, scheduled for June 26, 2021, was postponed due to the pandemic (Kipkura 2021). In Kampala Archdiocese, candidates for Holy Orders lingered on for more than a year to get ordained only after special permission from the government (The Independent 2021). The Anglican diocese of Kampala ordained twelve priests and canonized others only after nine months of the subsisting pandemic (Kasozi 2020). The Anglican Diocese of Busoga twice postponed the canonization of several clergy and lay people due to the pandemic. The failure to have the canonization events and ordination of priests, negated the supposed spirituality gains within the church (Religious Cleric 6, Church of Uganda, Interview). Without priests, the church's sacramental life was constrained, for which the clergy are the main celebrants, hence reducing the church in Uganda to that of lay believers (Religious Cleric 8, Catholic Church, Interview, Jinja Diocese).

The government's imposition of the curfew from 7:00 pm. in the evening to 5:30 am. in the morning affected traditional religious practices during the Muslims' fasting month. They neither held *Tarawiih* prayers nor had the customary *iftar* meals at the mosques taken place as was previously the norm. *Iftar* meals were made possible through provisions of individual philanthropists or contributions from Muslims who attended prayers in a specific mosque. Through *iftar*, Muslims enjoyed unity and companionship, ultimately enlisting a sense of contentment among believers. During the first wave of the pandemic, the ban on congregational prayers as well as the imposition of night curfews made it practically impossible for Muslims to hold *Tarawiih* prayers in 2020. Muslims found it difficult to accomplish the 20 accustomed *rakahs* during *Tarawiih* prayers. In many cases, it was difficult for any group to complete the reading of the whole Quran during the pandemic fasting seasons (Religious Cleric 4, Islamic faith, Interview, Masindi). To the less committed Muslims, the challenges posed by the virus during the fasting month brought a sigh of relief from the incessant *iftar* and *Tarawiih* demands, while the devoted felt cheated and spiritually incomplete.

Ugandan Muslims had two unusual *Eid al-Fitr* celebrations during the subsistence of the pandemic. The first one was in May 2020 when Uganda was in a total lockdown. The Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) leadership advised Muslims to conduct *Eid al-Fitr* prayers from their homes.

*Eid al-Fitr* prayers, however, were televised at the national Muslim headquarters at Old Kampala, attended by less than 10 people. This nature of *Eid al-Fitr* celebrations denied Muslims an opportunity to pray in the prescribed format as per tradition, with less *rakahs*, no sermon (*kutbah*), as well as a failure to contribute to charity (*zakat*) – a mandatory requirement after attending *Eid al-Fitr* prayers (The Independent 2020b). To enable the Muslims to accomplish their *zakat* obligations during the lockdown, the UMSC leadership introduced the practice of sending monetary charity through the mobile money system. Muslim clerics, however, noted that this was evaded by Muslims who had been less committed to charity during pre-pandemic times, as the pandemic was a convenient scapegoat to forfeit this religious obligation. Although by the second *Eid al-Fitr* in May 2021, congregational worship was permitted for up to 200 congregants, several Muslims were financially incapacitated by the lockdown, rendering them powerless in funding both the *iftar* and *Eid al-Fitr* celebrations (The Independent 2020a).

Contrary to the pre-pandemic call for a massive turn up for Christmas prayers, religious clerics endorsed Christmas prayers on televisions and online platforms. Christian religious clerics invented more church services on Christmas to enable more devotees to attend Christmas prayers. The observations about Easter during the pandemic were not any different. The central issue about Easter is the commemoration of the ‘way of the cross’ under the Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC). This is usually celebrated on Good Friday. While the ‘way of the cross’ was not observed by the UJCC in 2020 in the customary manner, Christian churches encouraged their members to observe the event around their homes. Family members were encouraged to walk in procession around their compounds, though several Christians skipped this event because their homes were not conducive enough (Kisekka, Ssekweyama, Ocungi, & Luwaga 2020). The impact of the restrictions frustrated Muslim as well as Christian devotees due to the presumed missing of spiritual rewards emanating from the abscondment of religious days and events. However, to the nominally religious, the limitations of Covid-19 were a blessing in disguise. It aided them in eschewing ‘burdensome’ religious sacrifices.

Another noteworthy Christian and Islamic religious practice is making pilgrimages to holy sites. Ugandan Muslims fancy the holy cities of Mecca and Medina while Christians visit the Uganda Martyrs site at Namugongo. The pandemic made it impossible even for the financially-able Muslims to

make pilgrimages. Saudi Arabia, the host of the Islamic holy sites downsized pilgrims to fully vaccinated Saudi Arabian residents (Religious Cleric 4, Islamic faith, Interview, Masindi). The church called off the pompous annual celebrations of the Uganda Martyrs at the shrines of the Namugongo Roman Catholic and Anglican Church of Uganda, scheduled for June 3 – a designated public holiday. The Namugongo Martyrs shrines had been a crowd magnet for the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church calendars before the pandemic, attracting up to three million pilgrims worldwide in commemoration of 45 young Christian converts – 23 Anglicans and 22 Catholics – who were martyred between 1885 and 1887 on the orders of the then reigning monarch of the Buganda Kingdom, Kabaka Mwanga, in a test of divided loyalty between the king and faith (Ofungi 2021).

In 2021, a representative number of only 200 pilgrims, most of whom were religious clerics and government officials participated in the annual celebrations at the Uganda Martyrs Catholic shrine of Namugongo (Oluka 2021). This was the first ever virtual Uganda martyrs celebrations (Lukwago 2021; Oluka 2021). To some Christians, however, this was spiritually inadequate because they were uncertain of a response to their prayers and a realistic connection with the martyrs (Daily Monitor 2021). Celebrating the Uganda martyrs which involves walking, usually offered Christians an ideal atmosphere to reflect, pray, and rebuild their Christian lives (Daily Monitor 2021). For the Pentecostal Christians, the annual end of the year Christian Passover festivals were restricted for the two years of 2020 and 2021. The annual end of the year Passover festival in Namboole, organized by Apostle Dr. Joseph Sserwada under the auspices of the Victory Church Ministries used to bring together more than 100,000 Pentecostal Christians. This festival had portrayed some level of Pentecostal Christian identity in the country. The Nelson Mandela National Sports Stadium in Namboole which used to host the festival on December 31 of each year had been turned into an isolation and auxiliary treatment center for Covid-19 victims. Pastor Robert Kayanja's 77 days of glory (77 DOGS) and Pastor Jackson Ssenyonga's five P's (praise, power, prayer, prosperity, and permanent miracles) were also called off (Isiko 2020b:631). The pandemic therefore not only negatively affected Uganda's religious tourism but also denied Ugandans a religious identity.

## Devotionalism

It was established that Covid-19 had a great impact on the devotional life of some people. The less devoted before the pandemic further weakened their religiosity. The staunch in pre-pandemic times became more devoted. It was further established that devotionalism increased at personal and family levels but declined at community level. The pandemic brought some people closer to religion and God because the former's contagious nature and lack of cure by then heightened the fear of death, hence urging people to reflect more on their relationship with God. According to religious clerics, Covid-19 turned some Ugandans into religious fanatics who shunned sin. In support of this finding, an Anglican clergy noted, 'Some drunkards no longer drink due to the closure of bars and all recreation centers, thus reflecting on their spiritual lives. There is a Christian who abandoned alcoholism after suffering severely from Covid-19' (Religious Cleric 13, Anglican Church, Interview).

The pandemic provided an eschatological attitude, providing a new historical threshold that reminded believers about the coming to an end of the world and the promise of salvation (Mirela 2021:463). It led to more involvement and participation of lay people in religious rites that were considered a preserve for the clergy. With the guidance of religious clerics, homes became central to holding liturgical services and *Swallah*, attended by family members. The Anglican Church in Busoga designed a liturgical order of services for homes. This helped them to hold weekly family Sunday services. The family members shared liturgical roles, ensuring a resemblance of a fully-fledged congregational Sunday service. The roles of worship leader, text reader, preacher, and collection of offertories would be shared appropriately depending on the family size (Religious Cleric 12, Anglican Church, Interview). One parent stated, 'I have been equipping my male children with Islamic knowledge to act as Imams and lead in prayers at home. We shifted congregational prayers from the mosque to homes, though with limited numbers' (Religious Cleric 3, Islamic faith, Interview, Kampala).

The previous cleric revealed that the closure of places of worship led to intensive prayer and religious instruction of their children at family level, especially of the already staunch parents. Some parents with limited religious knowledge used lay religious leaders within their communities to instruct the children. The lockdown therefore led to more intense catechism and prayers than in the pre-pandemic era. This enhanced the religious commitments of



families as well as family unity. It is also in sync with the old religious adage, ‘a family that prays together, sticks together’. One respondent asserted that one of the indicators of a family’s religiosity in Uganda is belonging to the same religion and praying as a family (Religious Cleric 13, Anglican Church, Interview). One respondent narrated, ‘Much devotion has been noticeable during the pandemic. I have witnessed worthwhile concentration among the downsized Catholic funeral and burial congregation. Whereas it is difficult to measure the amount of devotion, attentiveness and paralinguistic cues of the attendees signal increased devotion and commitment to their faith’ (Religious Cleric 9, Catholic Church, Interview).

The observation by the above cleric indicates that a mere attendance of prayer may fall short in measuring religiosity. Effective attendance requires listening to the religious message. The shutting down of places of worship tested the generosity of religious people through willful giving, tithing, and payment of *zakat*. Whereas it is a tradition for both Muslims and Christians to make financial contributions, *zakat*, and offertory respectively, this was inhibited. Religiously motivated financial generosity showcased devotion. Pentecostal churches intensified the issuing out of mobile money numbers on which the tithes would be disbursed. Other churches provided bank account numbers to Christians to deposit their offertory. In some less sophisticated cases, the clergy encouraged their followers to keep tithes and offertories until the places of worship would open again. Muslims were encouraged to get in touch with their Imams to pass on their *zakat* to the needy. In cases where such alternative and aggressive strategies to mobilize funds were made, the results were positive. A respondent averred, ‘The religious commitment of the Catholics in my parish has been tested and strengthened through financial contributions to the priests during the lockdown. Catholics have contributed both financially and through tangible food items’ (Religious Cleric 8, Catholic Church, Interview, Jinja Diocese).

In Uganda, financial contribution is a measure of one’s devotion to their faith. However, the continued contribution was for the earlier devoted. The closure of places of worship was a scapegoat for the less committed to evade making financial contributions to their religious institutions (Religious Cleric 12, Anglican Church, Interview). All in all, the closure of places of worship promoted nominalism and a devaluation of religious attendance. Religious nominalism weakened people’s faith further. Before the pandemic, the less committed only hung in there due to constant religious instruction dur-

ing congregational worship. One priest acknowledged a reduced church attendance after the first lockdown (Religious Cleric 13, Anglican Church, Interview). This was partly because of the alternative ways of worshipping ushered in by the circumstances of the pandemic (Religious Cleric 4, Islamic faith, Interview, Masindi; Religious Cleric 13, Anglican Church, Interview). The finding is consonant with the study done by Bergan and McConatha (2001:24) which identifies physical limitations among this group as a hindrance to the expression of their religiousness. Mainstream churches, especially the Anglican church of Uganda and the Roman Catholic Church were the main losers in this technological shift, yet the Pentecostal churches were thriving.

### **Innovations for Religious Life and Practice**

In order to maintain a semblance of pre-pandemic religious life, a lot of innovations were adopted. The major objective was to keep in touch with the followers despite the ban on religious gatherings. The most prominent mechanism was digital literacy. Digital literacy involves the use of digital technologies to convey, search, consume, and participate in religious activities. The search for religion was shifted from places of worship to the internet and other media. In all, there were three categories of digital media technologies that were used: The internet based platforms, radio and television, as well as ordinary cell phones. Internet based media included, among others Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube. Small Christian communities evolved themselves into social media groups through which religious clerics would preach. There were also official religious institutions and social media platforms. Institutionalized churches like the Anglican Church of Uganda and Roman Catholic Churches in the urbanized areas used Zoom and Google meet platforms to conduct church services. The rural churches and mosques, however, remained untouched by the technological innovations. Religious clerics revealed an increased use of digital media technologies for religious activities during the pandemic as evidenced by this interviewee: ‘Digital literacy has promoted devotion among Catholics in my diocese. The phone calls (inquiring about digital church service programs during the pandemic) grossly outweigh those before the pandemic. There has been attendance to virtual assemblies’ (Religious Cleric 9, Catholic Church, Interview).

An interviewed Muslim cleric's insight was close to that quoted above. He argued, 'We are trying to use online platforms, but numerous Muslims lack smartphones. I receive many phone calls from people inquiring how to go about their faith. People use radios to listen to *Kutbah*. This has aided learning during this lockdown' (Religious Cleric 3, Islamic faith, Interview, Kampala).

The use of media technologies, however, faced challenges especially inaccessibility to gadgets. Despite Covid-19 having an impact on the evolution of online religious services, different religious followers reacted differently to these innovations. This promoted personal prayer and less dependence on the religious clerics for spiritual guidance, though numerous phone calls from Christians to clerics calling for prayers for specific challenges remained noticeable (Religious Cleric 13, Anglican Church, Interview). These experienced what Del Castillo *et al.* (2021:2297) describe as spiritual dryness – a failure to experience interpersonal closeness with the spiritual. The different home routines interfered with the effective participation and attendance to online religious programs.

The effectiveness of digital literacy as the 'new normal' for the revitalization of religiosity among Ugandans amidst the pandemic therefore remains debatable. The said challenges might have simply promoted nominalism. The innovative strategies were not wholly embraced especially by the elderly and women, who were mostly challenged with adapting to new technologies, let alone inaccessibility to digital devices. Technology favored the youths more. An Anglican priest of the Church of Uganda argued that online church meetings were not effective in having previously committed Christians to attend church services and meetings. Out of the approximately 3,000 members who attend worship services at St. Francis Chapel of Makerere University, about 300 attended the special online church teaching services for two weeks during the lockdown. The case was not so different for Bugolobi Church of Uganda (Religious Cleric 13, Anglican Church, Interview). This dismal attendance was attributed to limited internet data and connectivity, limited know-how of ICT use, dwindled concentration, and extortionate ICT infrastructure, as well as a mere hesitation to adapt to the new normal (Religious Cleric 7, Catholic Church, Interview). It should, however, be noted that digital media technologies can only enhance people's religiosity, but not replace traditional forms of expressing one's faith and devotion to religion.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The study aimed at establishing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the religious life and practice of Ugandans. It was established that the pandemic uniquely impacted people's religiosity. It revealed that those deeply committed to religion before the pandemic became more devoted during the pandemic. Conversely, congregants not well grounded in their faith before the pandemic, were negatively impacted. This finding is similar to that of the Colombian experience where the intensity of religiosity during the pandemic was dependent on one's pre-pandemic religious participation. In other words, pre-pandemic religious behavior was a determinant of the change in religious actions during the pandemic (Meza 2020:230). However, this finding challenges long-time theoretical and philosophical orientations which postulate a universally monolithic impact of pandemics, drawing people closer to religion (Bentzen 2013:3 of 40).

Previous studies have always held that natural disasters and pandemics draw people nearer to religion and God (Sibley & Bulbulia 2012:4-7 of 10; Bentzen 2013:3 of 40). However, such conclusions have been based on the experiences of disasters which have never involved shutting religion and places of worship from the depressed. Covid-19 instead dissuaded people from religious activities, especially of a congregational nature. In this very case, religious gatherings were identified as a hotspot for the spread of the virus, hence a ban on public congregational worship (Quadri 2020:219; Wildman *et al.* 2020:115). In India, the pandemic never affected religious activities because prayers are conducted in homes by the majority of these people (Fatima, Oyetunji, Mishra, Sinha, Olorunsogbon, Akande, & Kar 2022:6 of 7). In Europe and the United States, the lockdown heightened religious observance due to effective social welfare systems which economically sustained people despite the lockdown of the economies (Sahgal & Connaughton 2021:8 of 19; Sulkowski & Ignatowski 2020:10 of 15; Boguszewski *et al.* 2020:8 of 14; Del Castillo *et al.* 2021:2300). This availed time for personal religious reflection and observance, contrary to Uganda, with no known state welfare interventions. The less devoted Ugandans substituted religion time with survival hunting.

Contrary to precursory studies that religion yields a social connection among those grappling with natural disasters, this study revealed that Covid-19 and its containment measures curtailed people's association for fright of

infection among religious clerics and their followers. This rebuffed the religious intimacy which has overly been theorized to exist among religious people during times of natural disasters. Rather than drawing people to religious conversions as theorized by scholars regarding pandemics and disasters, Covid-19 measures made it unfeasible for people to get converted and confess their new faith. The ban on religious gatherings made Ugandans to lose a sense of belonging and religious identity. Indeed, the pandemic and its associated measures birthed disembodied religious communities especially in the urban areas, similar to other African countries like Nigeria (Omopo 2021:8-9).

Religious clerics who play a pivotal role in comforting and encouraging followers, retreated to themselves, creating a religious vacuum. Rather than acting as avenues for refugees and solace, places of worship were constructed as dens of Covid-19, worthy shunning. These revelations are indistinguishable from Europe where the visibility of religious leaders diminished in the wake of the pandemic (Dowson 2020:46), creating a stark divide between the religious individual and their religious community (Parish 2020:12 of 13). In the Arab world too, believers felt abandoned by their religious leaders (Piwko 2021:13 of 18). However, findings from Kenya are contradictory. The pandemic had no significant effect on both religious affiliation and participation in religious activities, albeit with a ban on religious gatherings (Sambu *et al.* 2021:9 of 18). The Kenyan experience was attributed to the reduced costs on media and online coverage of religious activities during the pandemic which aided the access of the majority. The pandemic therefore became a personal test of religious resilience. It discerned the nominal from the committed religious people. Indeed, as advanced by Pillay (2020:272), Covid-19 ‘flattened the curve’ on hierarchical religious structures. It then encouraged a rethinking on mediation of religious clerics in religious practice.

The pandemic contributed to the evolution of religious practices and events. Older forms of worship took on newer forms of religious expression. Indeed, as argued by Pillay (2020:273), the pandemic provided a window for reimagining a new theology which is not focused on institutionalism, structure, roles, and rites, but being God’s transforming presence in the world. One such evolution was the intensive mediatization of religious life and practice. It was not imaginable before the pandemic that the Holy Communion for Christians could ever be celebrated over television. Relatedly, the holding of *Jumah* prayers, a traditionally congregational prayer by the Imam, alone in

the mosque as the rest of the Muslims followed on television, became a new revolution which the Islamic faith may have to contend with henceforth. Indeed, as advanced by Dowson (2020:42) and Parish (2020:2 of 13), such a religious revolution on the core beliefs and practices of religious faiths requires reflection to modify the embodied presence of religion in society. The thinking that God is responsive to those who physically gather in his Name in worship places was demystified by the religious innovations during the pandemic. It redefined the church as a group of Christians who belonged to the same online church, church WhatsApp, or Facebook group which challenged the orthodox religious teachings of Islam and Christianity which prioritize congregational prayer (Syahrul *et al.* 2020:273).

However, digital media technological innovations cannot replace or effectively enable religious followers to fully savor religious practices as some require mediation by the clergy, for example, baptism, weddings, and the Holy Communion. Indeed, online religious worship activities limited diverse religious activities during the pandemic (Meza 2020:230). Nonetheless, the challenges of a shift to online religious services seem to have been universal (Dowson 2020:42). Although technology was thought to have enabled a continued religious display, it was perceived as a double-edged sword, serving as both a motivator and barrier to religious practice (Ge *et al.* 2020:12 of 16). Whereas a big section of religious followers in Uganda was cut off by this shift, findings from Europe and the United States suggested otherwise, with the number of the faithful who embraced online Easter Mass tripling (Parish 2020:7-8 of 13). This illustrates the non-universal impact of Covid-19 on religious life and practice. The swift adoption of technology and social media by religions for worship during the pandemic provide an opportunity for religious organizations and scholars to reflect deeply on the intersection between religion, technology, and digitalization in developing countries.

One of the limitations of the study is that these findings cannot be generalized to all religious groups in Uganda because of differences in forms of religious expression. For example, believers of African indigenous religions and Hinduism in Uganda may not have found the pandemic constraining to their expression of faith because most of the time they do not require institutionalized places of worship which could be shut down. Second, evidence used in this article was reliant on opinions of religious clerics, but not ordinary religious members who could have provided first-hand personal experiences. The unconventional 'remote' research methods of data collection

like WhatsApp and ordinary phone interviews excluded some knowledgeable religious leaders.

All in all, the religious experiences of Ugandan people during the pandemic contribute to the debate about the obsession with quantifying religiosity over qualitative studies. It has for example, been demonstrated that religious practitioners have their own description of religiosity contrary to the quantitative indices put up by researchers. Indeed, religiosity depends on the population under study as well as the methodological and analytical approaches used by different researchers.

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*Alexander P. Isiko*

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Dr Alexander Paul Isiko  
Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy  
Faculty of Arts and Humanities  
Kyambogo University, Uganda  
[alexisiko@yahoo.com](mailto:alexisiko@yahoo.com)