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# **The Effects of Religion on Uganda's Socio-Economy**

**POLICY BRIEF 0222051**

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The Center of Faith, Family and Justice (CFFJ) is a Ugandan Christian Think Tank founded in 2021 to contribute to evidence-based policy, advocacy, and decision making. Our main focus is to investigate how the social, political and economic conditions of life affect faith, family and justice. We aspire to connect policymakers and citizens; and to build transformed, resilient, and integrated communities.

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## Content

Executive Summary.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Historical Background of Religion in Uganda.....	4
Why Ugandans are so religious.....	4
Positive contributions of Religion to Uganda's socio-economy.....	5
Negative Contributions of Religion to Uganda's socio-economy.....	7
Conclusion.....	8
References.....	8

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of the Ugandan Population by Religion, 2014.....	3
Figure 2: Percentage Distribution of Population by Religion Category, 2014 .....	3

## Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the effects of religion on Uganda's socio-economy. It finds that Uganda is a highly religious country, a strong heritage from her deeply spiritual history.

The brief highlights how religious Ugandans are, the reasons they are deeply religious, and the positive and negative effects of religion on Uganda's socio-economy.

We find that almost all Ugandans practice some kind of religion. Religion is also deeply embedded in the Ugandan lifestyle because of her highly spiritual culture.

Religion serves society by promoting cohesion, strengthening family, promoting social protection, doing good works, providing employment, and building infrastructure, among others.

We see that several practitioners and religious leaders also use religion for their own selfish gain. Several interventions are possible to protect citizens from such exploitative tendencies.

In conclusion, we find that the Christian faith, in particular, serves to promote society. Churches preserve culture and traditions in society. They promote morality and peace, and most importantly, they support and promote family—the core of societies.

## Introduction

Like the rest of Africa, Uganda enjoys a rich religious heritage made mainly of Christianity, Islam and Indigenous religions. Outside the Institution of Family to which all belong, Religious bodies in Uganda constitute the most extensive social institutions in the country. Only 0.2% of Ugandans identify themselves as non-religious (UBOS 2014). Indeed, the Constitution of Uganda provides for Freedom of Worship (Uganda Law Reform Commission 2006), allowing people to live and worship however they deem fit.[1] Many blend Christianity and Islam with their indigenous religions to form syncretistic practices that augur well (Segawa 2016).

The first stanza of Uganda's National Anthem is evidence of the trust Ugandans have in God's ability to raise and uphold a nation. It goes;

Oh, Uganda,  
May God uphold thee,  
We lay our future in thy hand  
United, free,  
For liberty  
Together we'll always stand

Religion and religious practices, for this paper, refer to 'Human beings' relation to what they regard as holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine, or worthy of special reverence' (Britannica n.d.).

## Ugandans engage in religious practices for several reasons:

*The salvation of the soul and securing eternal life:* Christians believe that they can obtain salvation for their souls through their faith in God and Jesus Christ.[2] Christians and Moslems[3] believe in life after death, the conditions of which are determined by their beliefs and lifestyles here on earth.

*Power here on earth:* For some, religion gives them an upper hand in the dealings of life. Abilities to foretell the future through dreams, visions, and premonitions may keep the bearers of this knowledge alert to what is to come, possibly avoiding predicted dangers while positioning themselves for victory.[4]

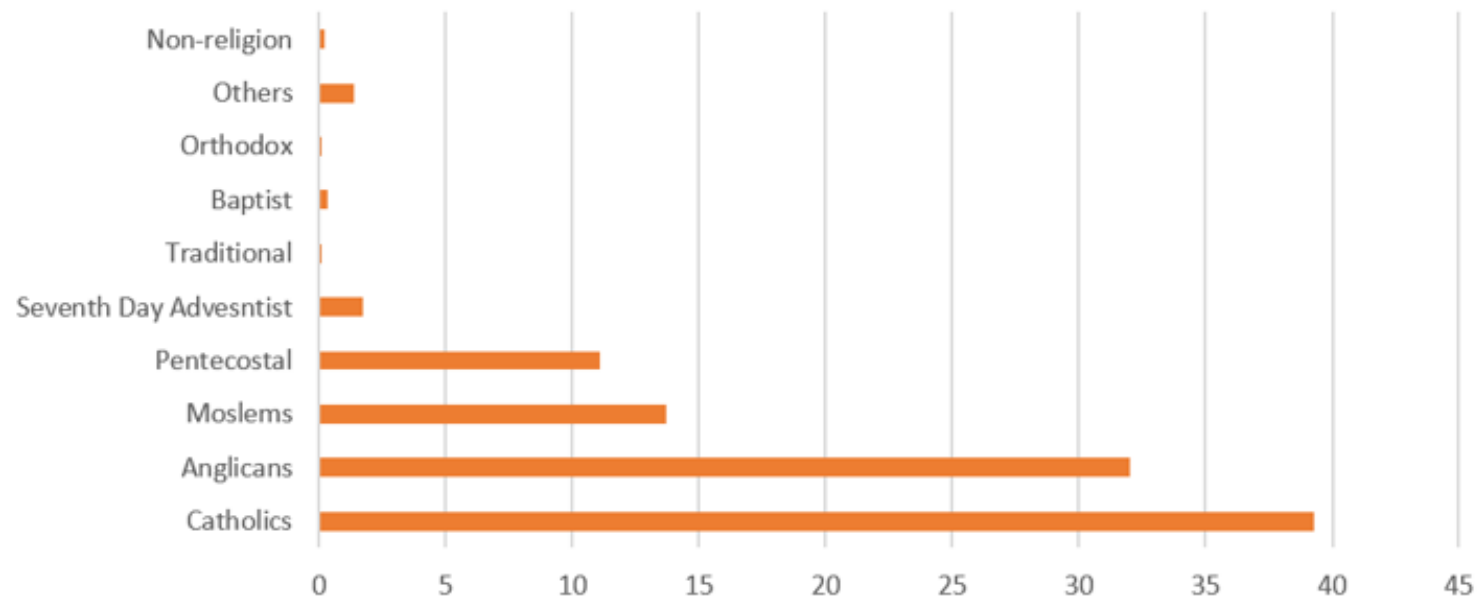
*Providence:* Many practitioners of religion look to God for strength, grace, opportunity, provision, grace, favour, good fortune, and healing.

*Value system:* Religions provide value systems to uphold and by which to live. Many of these values give practitioners a sense of purpose, peace, contentedness, and a sense of direction. No wonder religious people often record higher levels of well-being than non-religious people.

*Identity and Belonging:* Because of their nature and structure as prominent social and spiritual institutions, religions bind people together by providing a common ground for meeting people's innermost needs and desires. Religions provide a sense of security to believers, giving them a sense of belonging and thus identity. Religion provides both very personal experiences and group experiences, personal identities and group identities.

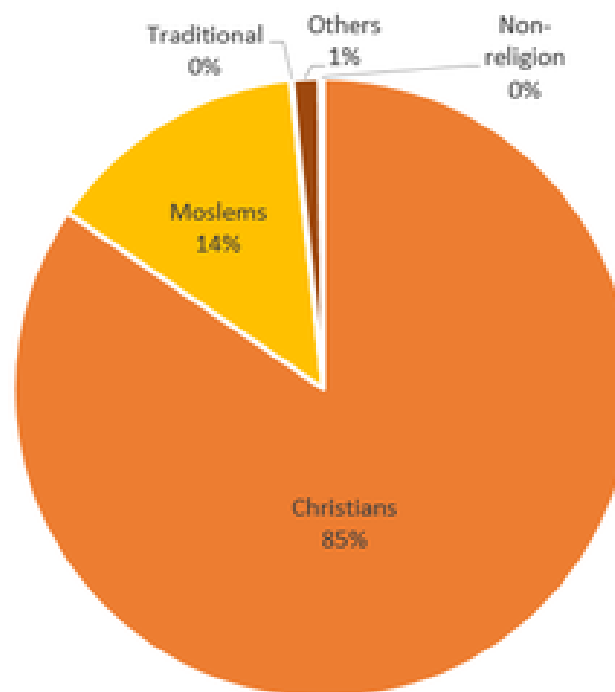
**Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of the Ugandan Population by Religion, 2014.**

Source: Data from UBOS



**Figure 2: Percentage Distribution of Population by Religion Category, 2014**

Source: Data from UBOS



According to the most recent National Planning and Housing Census in Uganda held in 2014, the results in figure 1. indicate the national distribution of religious beliefs.

The results show that Christians (Catholics, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, Baptists, and Orthodox) outnumber Moslems and the other religions, as shown in Figure 2. 'Others' categorised all religious affiliations whose percentage of the population is less than 0.1 (UBOS 2014). These include the Salvation Army, Baha'i, Jehovah's Witnesses, Presbyterian, Hindus, Mammon, Jews and Buddhists.

### Historical Background of Religion in Uganda

Historically, Ugandans practised several traditional religions based on their tribal beliefs and practices.[5] For instance, "The ancient Religion of the Baganda, before the importation of the Sesse [sic] Islands' gods [the Lubaale], was monotheistic. They worshipped the Creator of all things under various titles: Katonda, the Creator; Mukama, the Master; and Seggulu, the Lord of Heaven [with] a shrine at Butonda in Kyaggwe County." [6] Uganda, a land of over 45 million people, consists of many tribes that stem from four main ethnic groups:[7] the Bantu, the Nilotic, the Nilo Hamites, and the Hamites (Transforming Uganda n.d.). Many of these indigenous religions had no mainstream names, but culture and religion went hand in hand to form many longstanding traditions.

Islam and Christianity swept through Africa in the 19th century, and with them came colonial rule and the beginning of formal education

and westernisation as we know it. Islam first entered "Uganda" through Buganda with the Arab traders from Zanzibar in the 1840s.

According to J.F. Faupel, "Shortly before the middle of the 19th century, Buganda's isolation from the outside world was broken by the visit of the first Arab, the Sheikh Ahmed-bin-Ibrahim, who was graciously received by Kabaka Suna [sic]. Other Arabs followed, and trade between Buganda and the Arabs of Zanzibar and the coastal areas began to develop." [8]

Indigenous religious practices in Uganda started as early as the earliest settlements were formed with migrants from West Africa in the mid-2nd millennium BCE. (Cartwright 2019)

### Why Ugandans are so religious

Religion has thrived in Uganda as in Africa for several reasons:

*Big and strong families* are at the heart of the Ugandan society, and as Mary Eberstadt argues in her book 'How the West Really Lost God' more families equal more God because having children in a father and mother-led household inspires the parents and subsequently, their children towards spirituality and Religion (Eberstadt 2013). She argues that Children give parents a reason to believe in something greater than themselves through the process of procreation. The birth process is, for many, a miraculous event. Birth is a process most parents believe is divine.

*Children also motivate parents to attend religious gatherings* because these provide a stable, nurturing environment for the formation of children.

Religion is also commonly argued to *provide a sense of control and agency* to its adherents (Bremner 2013). Many people live below the poverty line in Uganda. They live in dire conditions and generally face a bleak future. Problems both within and out of the control of the individuals would generally cause helplessness and hopelessness. Religion steps into such situations, providing:

- A sense of a higher purpose, a less superficial reason to hang in there.
- Hope for a better future.
- An avenue to do something about these problems—pray about them, fast, talk to people, find support, and make valuable connections.

Ugandans all share *a very religious historical background*. As discussed earlier, Ugandans practised their indigenous traditional religions before Islam and Christianity were brought into the region through traders and missionaries, respectively.

Like other Africans, Ugandans were already highly attuned to spiritual experiences that included prophetic dreams and visions, communicating with the dead, seeking and finding guidance from ancestors, worshipping trees, lakes and many other artefacts in which they believed different gods lived. By the time Islam and Christianity entered the scene, Ugandans already had fully grounded religious beliefs, and many of them still practice these traditional religions alongside contemporary Christianity and Islam.

## Positive contributions of Religion to Uganda's Socio-Economy

The effects of Religions are usually far-reaching in society because religion shapes the ultimate unit of society—its individuals. Good individuals make a good society. Productive individuals make a productive society. The Odoki Commission, during the 1995 constitution-making process, noted that: "From the time Uganda became a British Protectorate [i.e. 1894] up to the present day, religious bodies have been active in providing social services...Their influence is still strong in these fields..." [9].

The benefits of religion in the Ugandan society, therefore, are immense and are both tangible and intangible:

Although Uganda does not subscribe to a particular faith and instead embraces all, *it has put in place Faith-Based initiatives and policies in critical areas like education[10] and family*. Uganda also subscribes to pro-family policies like anti-abortion[11] and anti-homosexuality [12]. These policies both honour Religious tenets and preserve Uganda's own traditional culture.

Religion has long been known to *provide solace to seekers* from far and wide. Ugandans are no different, especially since Uganda is an underdeveloped nation. Religion *helps the suffering cope and deal with their poverty and disenfranchisement*. It provides people with an escape and a sense of control and agency over their life situations.



Through religion, they can 'do something' about the problem through prayer, being encouraged to act, and even finding opportunities for life transformation through the church networks.

Social cohesion is another positive byproduct of religious practice.

Religions bring people together, binding communities stronger through shared beliefs and experiences. Religious gatherings play an adhesive role in communities, bringing people of different backgrounds together, thus promoting unity in society [13].

Communities all through Uganda *benefit from the acts of good service done by religious groups*. Missions, scholarships, charitable causes, feeding the hungry, helping and praying for the sick, supporting the weak and needy like orphans and widows—all such good acts of service make the community a better place. "Many people expressed views to the [Odoki] Commission appreciating the work of religious bodies...in providing social services. In some areas, they provide vital services that the Government is not in a position to do." [14]

Religions also *promote peaceful coexistence* in the community. Because many faiths have 'Love Your Neighbour' as a major tenet, the positive values they promote strengthen society's moral fibre. These values go a long way in promoting peace and curbing potential strife and crime in society.

The social networks created in religious gatherings serve many benefits in society: the social groups promote their participants' mental health and well-being; participants can share opportunities and information promoting social and economic growth in society.

Religions *own large enterprises* like hospitals[15] and schools[16] in almost every community in Uganda. The services these enterprises provide show how significant their contribution to Uganda's social capital development is.

Religions *promote infrastructural development* in their respective societies. Anglican churches, for example, usually have building projects running at any given time.

Religions *promote life and family*. The Christian doctrine, for example, is built around the premise of a family—Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Christian views thus deem anti-life or anti-family lifestyles in society less than ideal or outright sinful. Moslems too promote family by allowing up to four wives per husband and encouraging procreation. Religions promote the growth of society both in numbers and virtue.

Uganda is a strong family state as opposed to a welfare state. Uganda's welfare burden is significantly reduced because, as religions promote, Ugandans have strong families who provide care and sufficient support for their weak, sick or elderly family members.

Religions *increase consumption expenditure* in the economy. Religions spend vast amounts of money in the economy to run their gatherings, activities and projects.

Worship centres *create many jobs* both directly and indirectly. They employ many people, both permanently and temporarily. These opportunities improve the well-being of society and reduce unemployment and idleness.



Religious programs provide nurturing, grooming and mentoring of congregants. For example, for the Anglican Church alone, wives, youth, children, and even husbands benefit from the Mother's Union, youth groups, Sunday school, and Father's Union. In these groups, women, for example, find support, learn from each other and build each other. This way, the church nurtures society.

Many religious groups also *promote social protection* in groups through SACCOs (Savings and Credit Cooperatives) which grow personal savings, lend to investors and make their investments. Such arrangements promote the economic developments not only of participants but of the economy.

Finally, religions provide *respite from the hardships this world offers*. Religious teachings provide comfort and guidance and improve well-being in society, especially for the poor and suffering whose lifestyles are taxing and are characterised by arduous work for which they get very little pay.

### **Negative Contributions of Religion to Uganda's Socio-Economy**

The very same religion that brings good to society can be used as a tool for evil and destruction. Although these negative attributes arise, it should be noted that they are not the original intentions of these religions. These problems are created when people use religion to achieve their agenda. Religion, by nature, is meant to be good for the soul, bringing healing and appealing to the good side of human nature. It is used initially as a tool to draw out the good-naturedness of people.

In Uganda, it is no phenomenon that many venture into 'pastor-hood' to make wealth off their generous congregants. Although people are generally aware of such motivations, they still throng churches in earnest belief and longing for spiritual connection and intervention.

Cults blossom in an environment that allows freedom of worship. Joseph Kibwetere's church—Movement for the Restoration of Ten Commandments of God—burned 778 people in a mass suicide to 'get them to heaven' is one case in point out of many (Massimo 2000).

Some international critics argue that Africans spend too much time and resources in the church. The time they should otherwise spend working and resources they would rather spend on investments.

The Government of Uganda (GoU) tried to regulate the registration and conduct of churches in Uganda (Yiga 2018), but they faced strong resistance from the church leaders who did not meet the new prerequisites of church formation. The Members of Parliament then withdrew that Bill, leaving the regulatory gap in place.

However, the Uganda Regulatory Services Bureau approves the registration of qualifying churches to conduct weddings.

Since the "Religious foundation bodies...have been the principal agents and sustainers of social services in Uganda since the [pre]colonial era began"[17].

(a) To protect the faithful from being duped, the Inter-Religious Council and other governing bodies should create guides and regulations by which religious organisations in Uganda should operate.

(b) The GoU should come out more strongly to support and complement the work of religious bodies in providing socio-economic services in the fields of education, health, agriculture, micro-finance, water and sanitation, among others.

(c) Both the GoU and religious bodies should together continue developing mediums of exchanging experience, expertise and personnel.

(d) Through religious bodies, the GoU should mobilise communities to participate in decision-making processes to provide the much-needed socio-economic services in those communities rather than what is less needed there[19]. The right to participate in government affairs is a fundamental human right in domestic and international law.[20]

(e) Lastly, Government should not unreasonably restrict religious bodies from receiving funds from abroad because these are primarily for the benefit of Ugandans.[21]

## Conclusion

While the debate on the role of religion is likely to continue, this paper finds overwhelming benefits of Religion in the Ugandan Society.

The Christian faith, in particular, serves to promote society. Churches preserve culture and traditions in society. They promote morality and peace, and most importantly, they support and promote family—the core of societies.

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## Notes

[1] See Article 29 (c) of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995 (as amended).

[2] This belief is premised on the doctrine of "soteriology" as understood in Systematic Theology. It is from the Greek word "sōtēria" to mean "salvation". "Sōtēr" refers to the "savior" or "preserver", and "logos" refers to "study" or "word". Cf. Petrenko, Ester A.G.D., 'Created in Christ Jesus for Good Works': The Integration of Soteriology and Ethics in Ephesians, Durham Theses, (PhD Diss.), Durham University, 2006. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/2748/> See also Magezi, V. & Magezi, C., 2016, 'Soteriology on the interface of traditional African religion and Christianity: Engaging Bediako's soteriology and a soteriological alternative', In *die Skriflig* 50(1), a2068. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i1.2068>

[3] Islamic tradition has generally held that it is relatively straightforward to enter Jannah (Paradise). See An'Nisa 4:31 in the Quran.

[4] C.f. Semakula, Kiwanuka M.S.M., *A History of Buganda: From the Foundation of the Kingdom to 1900*, Longman Group Ltd., London, 1971, pp. 177-179; Kaggwa, Sir Apollo, *Empisa za Baganda (The manners and customs of the Baganda)*; London, 1905 (reprinted 1918, 1952); Miti, James Kibuka Kabazzi, *A Short History of Buganda*, Bunyoro, Busoga, Ankole and Toro. Translated into English by G.K. Rock, a law clerk, "at the request of the author in order to make it available to scholars". Available in MSS form from Makerere and University of London Libraries; and Roscoe, J., *The Baganda: An Account of Their Native Customs and Beliefs*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011 (first published in 1911).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Faupel, J.F., *African Holocaust: The Story of the Uganda Martyrs*, P.J. Kenedy & Sons, New York, 1962, pp. 3-4.

[7] The Third Schedule to the Constitution of Uganda (supra) lists sixty-five (65) indigenous Ugandan communities as at 1 February 1926, the year the country's borders were crystallised.

[8] Ibid, n. 6, p. 9.

[9] *The Report of the Uganda Constitutional Commission: Analysis and Recommendations*, Kampala, 1993, para 24.75, p. 667.

[10] "The Catholic and Protestant Churches and the Muslims and other religious groups have all established many educational and health institutions all over the country... They are also involved in rehabilitation work in various area... [Para] 24.77

[11] The Ugandan Constitution, under Article 22 (2) states: "No person has the right to terminate the life of an unborn child except as may be authorised by law." See also Sections 141 and 143 of the Penal Code Act, Cap 120 (as amended).

[12] This is prohibited under Section 145 of the Penal Code Act, Cap 120. See also The Hansard of the Parliament of Uganda for debates on the repealed Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2004.

[13] It should, however, be noted that in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history of Uganda, religion has equally proved to be a divisive factor among her people and immensely contributed to their political, economic and social stratification. See Semakula, Kiwanuka M.S.M., *A History of Buganda: From the Foundation of the Kingdom to 1900*, Longman Group Ltd., London, 1971; Earle, Jonathon L., *Colonial Buganda and the End of the Empire: Political Thought and Historical Imagination in Africa*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017; Makubuya, Apollo N., *Protection, Patronage, or Plunder? Imperial Machinations and (B) Uganda's Struggle for Independence*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2018.

[14] —Ibid, n. 9, pp. 667-668.

[15] For example, Mengo Hospital was founded by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1897; Lubaga Hospital by the Roman-Catholic missionaries in 1899; and Kibuli Muslim Hospital was founded in 1975.

[16] The Protestant founded Mengo, Gayaza, and Budo founded in 1895, 1905, and 1906 respectively; the Catholics founded Namiryango and Nabbingo in 1902 and 1942 respectively; while the Muslims founded Nabisunsa and Kibuli in 1954 and 1959 respectively. Religious bodies have equally provided higher education through establishment of the Uganda Christian University by Anglicans; the Uganda Martyrs' University by Catholics; and the Islamic University in Uganda by Muslims.

[17] See The Odoki Report, (supra), para 24.80, p. 669.

[18] The Non-Governmental and Organisations Act, 2016.

[19] Mwesigwa, Jonathan S., Planning in Reverse? <https://africapolicycentre.org/2021/03/08/planning-in-reverse-gear/>

[20] Ibid. See also the Constitution of Uganda (supra) under Article 38 (1) and (2), and Objectives IX and X of the National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy.

[21] Say something about DGF, please.



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