

# Editorial: Religion and its Role in Addressing Three Critical Social Issues in Africa: Gender-Based Violence, Crime, and Poverty

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This December edition of the *Journal for the Study of Religion* problematizes the role and influence of religion on societies in Africa as they navigate three of the most challenging social issues in Africa, namely gender-based violence (GBV), crime, and poverty. The articles in this edition look at Muslim communities, Christian communities, southern African language communities, and prison communities exploring what role religions play in helping ordinary people to deal with the challenges of GBV, crime, and poverty. The findings of these articles suggest that religious interventions have little effect on practically reducing crime or the lowering of GBV. The articles by both Banda and Isiko and Kisekka indicate the different ways in which scholars think about the role that many people in Africa believe religion can or does have on addressing poverty.

In his article on the impact of faith-based programs to help prisoners rehabilitate themselves, Khan found that at a prison in Durban in South Africa, these programs have little effect. Authors such as Akhverdiev and Ponomarev (2008:1), Stark and Bainbridge (2012:1), as well as Welch, Tittle, and Grasmick (2006:1605) have argued that religions play an important role in establishing and maintaining positive and harmonious social order within societies. Nwube and Edigbo (2023), Ezeonwumelu (2021), Sekhaulelo (2021), Dick, Ede, and Chiagahnam (2020), and Nikolova (2018) have recently argued that as societies become less religious, a moral decline and rise in crime becomes noticeable. Khan's research argues that in the context of a South African prison community these arguments do not hold true. South Africa is a highly religious country and Khan found that many of the inmates at a prison in Durban had perpetrated violent crimes despite being practicing their faith

actively. In the prison system the prisoners participated in faith-based programs aimed at helping them to develop a sense of self-actualization which in turn would help them to become good citizens once they left the prison system. Yet, these programs had little effect on the prisoners' behavior and self-identification. There was also low attendance at these programs as prisoners questioned the relevance of programs like these, largely because they already had a sense of faith, prayed, and identified as belonging to a religious community before entering prison. This research in the article *Religion behind bars: Faith-based programs in the rehabilitation of offenders in the Medium B Westville Correctional Center, Durban* suggests that much more work needs to be done in Africa at least to understand the relation between faith and criminal behavior. The study indicates that having faith and belonging to a religious community does not discourage people from committing violent crimes. Once in prison the faith-based programs aimed to rehabilitate prisoners, also have little effect.

Following on the theme of religion and crime, the article *Agency in community: Understanding gender-based violence from within a Muslim community in Lenasia, Johannesburg* by Lombard and Hankela explores the relation between GBV and Islam among Muslim communities in Lenasia, Johannesburg (South Africa). The intersection between GBV and religion has been extensively studied. What this article offers to the larger conversation is a deeper understanding of the choices that Muslim women make in dealing with GBV and what shapes their understanding of GBV. Drawing on the articulation of agency and embodiment among pious Muslim women as conceptualized by Saba Mahmood (2001), this article shows how women choose to follow religious leaders in the Lenasia area whom they believe preach a message of gender justice. This led the women interviewed in this study to generally follow conservative, patriarchal religious leaders because they felt that these people are offering spaces of gender justice. In the process of their interviews Lombard and Hankela found that women chose leaders whom they felt were more influenced by the Prophet and his message, rather than the Qur'an and its teachings. Through this process the women internalized a particular understanding of what GBV means, which was deeply informed by the teachings of their religious leaders and the culture they formed part of. Religion, they found played a central role in maintaining a pervasive silence and continued stigmatization around GBV. They highlight that these findings are contextually specific to Muslim communities in Lenasia, but that they do

point to the importance of engaging with religious leaders and communities in their fight against GBV. They suggest that programs aimed at developing a more comprehensive understanding of GBV and empowering women to speak out about the GBV which they experience or observe, will only become possible in highly religious communities when these interventions work within the religious and cultural contexts of these communities.

Poverty and its impact on the African society is the third theme within this edition that unpacks critical issues in the lived experiences of ordinary people. In exploring the relation between poverty and religion, both Banda and Isiko and Kisekka show how religion is used by ordinary people to try and find relief from poverty. Like Lombard and Hankela, both Khan and Banda argue that religions can play a negative role in society. Banda, in his article *Stifling human responsibility? Human agency and transcendency in African spirituality and cultural idioms* focuses on the role of African traditional teachings with reference to prosperity and teachings of how to become wealthy. He argues that this teaching, much like that in African Pentecostalism, reduces the agency of individual people. It teaches them that their poverty is due to witchcraft, a lack of belief, and a lack of giving (or seeding) enough money to their spiritual leader. In his article Banda investigates African religious and cultural teachings by exploring proverbs and idioms in the chiShona, isiNdebele, and isiZulu languages. Through this analysis he finds that in African traditional religious and cultural knowledge systems there is a strong emphasis on teaching people that economic prosperity comes through spiritual efforts, as has been the way African traditional religions (ATRs) and cultures have been analyzed by people such as Mbiti (1969:209). Banda argues that a ‘major weakness in the African magical and spiritual understanding of the economy is the abrogation of human responsibility that blames poverty on adverse spiritual conditions such as witchcraft and various other spiritual powers’ (Banda 2024:10 of 18). Yet as Banda unpacks these idioms and proverbs in a more detailed and nuanced way he suggests that inherent in the African cultures and religions of the amaShona, amaNdebele, and amaZulu people there is a demand for people to take responsibility for their actions and for their material realities. All community members should use their agency to contribute to the wellbeing of the whole community. Banda argues that there needs to be a rethinking and reunderstanding of African traditional knowledge and teachings so that people can move away from a culture of consumption, which is so highly priced in Pentecostal teaching, to a culture of production

and productivity. Individuals need to move out of the ‘escapist’ (Banda 2022:8 of 10) and ‘blame syndrome’ (Neequaye 2013:213) promoted in ATRs and Pentecostalism, in which they do not take responsibility for their own actions and use their own agency to work for their own material income, but rather blame spiritual forces and magic for their ‘bad luck’.

The final article in this edition by Isiko and Kisekka gives a different take on prosperity and material wealth looking at the end of year Passover festivals in Pentecostal Churches in Uganda. In their article *Pentecostal re-inventions of the Passover: Contextual reflections on the end of year night worship festivals in Uganda* the authors argue that in these churches ancient Judeo-Christian rituals (particularly the Passover) are re-imagined as a sacred ritual to transfer believers safely to a new year. The rituals invoke images of Moses and crossing over the Red Sea out of captivity and poverty from Egypt into the promised land. These churches re-imagine this image as the church leaders guide people out of their poverty and despair of the old year into a new year. Through this they argue that the churches are reinventing African Pentecostal theologies, traditions, and practices, thus defining a unique African Pentecostalism. The authors suggest that through these festivals people engage in ecstatic prayers at midnight and all night rituals that call on God to deliver them from poverty, to exorcise evil forces, to make offerings (seed money), calling on God to bless them with material wealth and personal wellbeing. Through this process the charismatic gifts and powers of the leaders are exercised as they embody Moses leading the faithful to a new and blessed promised land or new year. In the article the authors show how much these rituals and all night festivals have become part of the Ugandan society showing how African Pentecostalism has become a central way in which people think about their poverty and hope for material and personal wellbeing.

These four articles highlight the different ways in which religions play a part in the everyday lives of people who are part of a range of communities in Africa – from a group of Muslim women in Lenasia (South Africa), language communities in southern Africa, prison communities in Durban (South Africa), and Pentecostal communities in Uganda. The studies indicate that in addressing the high crime rates and increasing occurrences of GBV more research is needed to understand how religions could become vehicles through which to more effectively address these social ills. When examining the role that religion plays in fighting poverty the papers signify the different ways in which religion and the fight against poverty are understood by African

scholars, African traditional knowledge systems, and ordinary people in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many people who practice African religions or are followers of Pentecostal Churches believe that material wealth is accessed through spiritual forces and magic. In this edition Banda argues that this teaching makes people dependent on religious forces and not active agents working towards their own material wellbeing. In this edition Isiko and Kisekka celebrate the call to exorcise evil spirits and call on God as the important way in which people are liberated from hopelessness and encouraged to remain hopeful, so that they will one day experience the promised blessings.

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