

THE CHRISTIAN UNION STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE INFLUENCE OF THEOLOGICAL GROUNDING ON CULTISM IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA

Authors

James Omondi Siwa⁽¹⁾; William Chesaina Kipkoros⁽²⁾; Japheth Kigen⁽³⁾

Main author email: omondi.siwa@gmail.com

(1.2.3) Kabarak University, Kenya.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyse the Christian Union (C.U.) students' perceptions of the influence of theological grounding on cultism in public universities in Kenya. Studies have shown that cultism is prevalent among university students, resulting in suicides, drug abuse, crimes, unrest, withdrawal from family, academic malpractices, failure, attrition, psychological and financial exploitation, among others. The study employed a descriptive research design. The study was carried out in six public universities in Kenya. A sample of 220 C.U. students was selected through simple random and stratified sampling methods. The study further included 60 small group Bible study leaders and 6 C.U. Patrons selected through purposive sampling. The study was guided by Bounded Choice Theory. This study established that theological grounding was perceived as contributing significantly to cultism ($\beta=0.194$; $p<0.05$). The study concludes that lack of adequate spiritual instruction may turn students to cultism since cults target students with a cursory familiarity with the scriptures, who lack a solid religious foundation, and who have been exposed to cultism as children. The study recommends training on cultism and on Bible study to enable students to attain spiritual strength prior to joining university. The Christian Unions should provide social support and discipleship for their members to shield them from cult recruiters. University Chaplains and C.U. Patrons should vet all preachers who come to the university to mitigate against cultic doctrines and practices.

Key terms: Christian Union students, cultism, theological grounding,

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Cultism has, over the years, made headlines around the world. The stories behind these cults, origins, leaders, and demise are fascinating and often disturbing. Many scholars have described cultism as extreme devotion and enthusiasm to a cause or principle with a religious leaning, whose activities and adherents seem esoteric to non-members (Nnajieta & Ahamefula, 2015). The term cult has also been used to refer to any group or movement that excludes itself from mainline faith as taught in the Bible to foster new doctrines and group practices after the teaching of the founder (Kigame, 2018). In the United Kingdom, Wallis (2003) found out that the Manchester University student union warned of cult recruitment and activities of the International Christian Church (ICC), which had been banned in campuses in London, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Manchester due to its teaching that non-members were doomed and for requiring members to recruit their friends as proof of their own commitment to the group. Oyemwinmina and Aibieyi (2015) assert that cultism is a growing social menace in universities in Nigeria. Medayanose (2016) and Nnam (2014) concur with the said authors that cultism in universities threatens life and peaceful co-existence due to its violent, destructive, and disruptive nature.

Kenyan universities are not spared of the risk of cultism, and according to a Kenya Gazette Notice Vol. XCVII No 10 and Notice No 991 dated 1st March 1995, a Commission of Inquiry led by Bishop Nicodemus Kirima was launched by President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi, the second President of the Republic of Kenya, to investigate allegations of the existence of the cult of devil worship in Kenya. The task force was to report on the linkage to drug abuse and other anti-social activities and how it had affected learning institutions and measures to deal with the menace. The Commission reported, in part, to the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) that it had found evidence of students' involvement in cultism. It further revealed that cult recruitment was clandestine, with prospects unaware that they were being lured into a cult. Thus, there is a need to establish the Christian Union students' perceptions of the influence of theological grounding on cultism in public universities in Kenya.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been observed that various cults are effective among those in whom the early seeds of Christianity have been planted. It is much easier for cultists to promulgate their doctrines among young Christians, nominal Christians, and those who have only a passing acquaintance with the Scriptures (Martin, 2003). Students who are not well grounded spiritually and in their Biblical knowledge are likely to be captured by cultists. Olajugbe (2001) found out that inadequate religious and moral instructions and education can lure undergraduate students into embracing cultism. Aboribo (1999) elucidated that cult leaders manipulate their targets at their weakest point, adding that cultism essentially is a spiritual matter. Aboribo further posits that most doctrinal cults bombard vulnerable people such as the poor, the oppressed and the spiritually weak. Martin (2003) posited that it is much easier for cultists to promulgate their doctrines among young and nominal Christians who may be shallow in their knowledge of the Bible. Martin further opines that such cults as Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons targeted new converts. In his analysis of non-African cults, Kigame (2018) mentions Jehovah Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day-saints or Mormonism, the Unification Church, Branhamism and the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God as examples of such cults.

Ongong'a and Akaranga (2013) posited that students who have no spiritual vitality are more prone to religious switching. Some students get recruited into cultism because they do not know any other religion. Ongong'a and Akaranga further posit that people who did not have a good religious foundation since early childhood were easily swayed into believing in cultist doctrines and farther away from the true religion.

Cherono (2019) intimates that several students at the University of Nairobi have been exploited religiously, either knowingly or unknowingly, further insinuating that this is due to the poor religious grounding of students. This is further asserted by Oyemwinmina and Aibieyi (2015), that the poor spiritual foundation of children will expose them to the menace of cultism. The students come to campus not yet tested in their faith and experience considerable challenges to their prior religious perspectives, which are often greatly influenced by their parent's views. If their spiritual foundations were weak, they end up in cults.

A study conducted by Kagema and Maina (2014) on New Charismatic movements (NCMs) revealed that new charismatic churches know that people in college are vulnerable because of their lack of life experience, their search for truth, and something fulfilling, especially in religion. In their study, the above authors revealed that 85.6 per cent of their respondents said that the NCMs provided them with answers for issues such as HIV/AIDS, unemployment, discouragement, homelessness, financial stress, and broken families. Spiritual emptiness was cited by 94.2 per cent of their respondents, whereas 88.4 per cent said that the mainline churches were not spiritually satisfying. 90.6 per cent of respondents confessed that the NCMs provided a guaranteed future, adding that poor conditions and unemployment are pushing people to religious fringe groups where they may find hope. This goes on to prove that students are thirsty for spiritual nourishment, and they also want answers to various occurrences in life, like natural calamities. Members who defect from the main line churches to these movements (and to cultism) do so because of hunger for spiritual satisfaction. Cherono (2019) concurs with the above authors and asserts that new believers or novice recruits fall prey to cults due to spiritual naivety and ignorance. Coates (2011) states that people join charismatic groups due to a search for spiritual meaning and identity.

An error in Bible interpretation has been the source of many Christian cults, which either quote verses out of their Biblical context to prove their idea or quote just a few verses on a subject without considering all the verses on that subject found in the Bible (O'Donovan, 2016). Sire (2009) concurs with O'Donovan that scripture twisting and selective reading of scripture to achieve a preconceived agenda is common among Christian cults. The above researchers studied theological grounding as a factor contributing to cultism among university students, but this study seeks to establish the Christian union student's perception of the influence of theological grounding on cultism in public universities in Kenya.

Theoretical Framework

This study was pegged on the Bounded Choice Theory, which was developed by Lalich (2004). Lalich (2004), a cult specialist, described the "Bounded Choice Theory" as a model that can be used as a tool for examining and analysing cults or high-demand groups. It is a socio-psychological theory developed to interpret the behaviour of true believers in a closed, charismatic context. The theory explains the seemingly

irrational behaviour of the most dedicated adherents and attempts to consider individual decisions within the context of an authoritarian, transcendent, and closed group. The theory posits that once people join cultic groups, they may cease to socialise with anyone outside the cultic group and become locked in or bounded. They become irrational in their thoughts, and it becomes difficult for them to exit the group. The bounded choice theory was used to study the Christian Union students' perception of the influence of theological grounding on cultism in public universities in Kenya.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive research design. Kothari and Garg (2014) and Serem et al. (2013) argue that descriptive research design is concerned with specific predictions, narration of facts and characteristics of individuals, groups, or situations, and generalisability of the data. The descriptive research design was appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to capture respondents' feelings, opinions, and views (original data) on Christian Union students' perceptions of factors influencing cultism in public universities in Kenya. This design is appropriate for this study due to the need to collect data at one point in time, and the researcher does not manipulate the data but rather establishes the relationships between variables without manipulation.

Location of the Study

The study was carried out on the main campuses of six public Universities in Kenya, namely Kenyatta University, Egerton University, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), Moi University, Maseno University and Chuka University. These public universities were selected because cases of cultism have been reported in them (FOCUS Kenya 2020) and Kenya Police Service (2018). Furthermore, the student population in these universities derives from all the seven regions in Kenya, thus a representation of the whole country.

Population of the Study

The study targeted fifty-five thousand six hundred (55,600) Christian Union students in public universities in Kenya (FOCUS Kenya 2022). The accessible population of the study was ten thousand nine hundred (10,900) Christian Union students in the six selected public Universities in Kenya, namely: Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), Kenyatta University, Moi University, Egerton University, Maseno University and Chuka University. The study also included six (6) Christian Union patrons from the six universities, one from each university and sixty (60) small group Bible study leaders, ten (10) from each of the Universities.

Sampling Technique

The researcher selected the subjects (Christian Union students) at the university level using a simple random sampling method. Once the sample size was determined, a stratus was created per university using stratified random sampling. The researcher then used the purposive sampling method to select six Christian Union patrons, sixty (60) small group bible study leaders, and ten (10) from each of the six (6) universities. According to Babbie (2011), purposive sampling is a method utilised by researchers in selecting cases that would best answer his/her questions and meet his/her research objectives.

The sample size was calculated and determined using the formula propounded by Nassiuma (2000), which is independent of the population's underlying probability distribution. Thus, the sample size $n = \frac{NC^2}{C^2 + (N-1)e^2}$ where n is the sample size, C is the Coefficient of Variation, N is the accessible population, and e is the error margin. Nassiuma (2000) suggested that the coefficient of variation (C) is <30 per cent while the error margin (e) is fixed between 2-5 per cent. The researcher picked C of 30 per cent and an error margin of 2 per cent where n is the required sample size, N is the total population of the six universities, C is the coefficient of variation (0.3), and e is the error margin (0.02). Therefore, using the formula, the sample size for the study was two hundred and twenty (220).

Research Instruments

The study used a structured questionnaire to collect data for the Christian Union students. Meanwhile, an interview guide was used to gather information from the Christian Union patrons and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) for small group Bible study leaders.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed through inferential and descriptive statistics. In descriptive statistics, percentages means, and standard deviations were applied. In inferential analyses, Multiple Regression and Pearson correlation were computed. The independent variables' influence on dependent variables was tested using multiple regression. The dependent and independent variables relationship was measured using the Pearson correlation. Since this research utilised mixed methods, qualitative data was finally analysed thematically and combined with those that were analysed through quantitative methods.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study sought to establish the Christian Union students' perception of the influence of theological grounding on cultism in public universities in Kenya.

Table 1: Theological Grounding and Cultism

Statement	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	SD
Insufficient religious instruction can entice undergraduates to embrace cultism	1%	18%	50%	31%	3.10	0.72
Cultists quickly indoctrinate Christians with superficial Scriptural knowledge	4%	21%	44%	32%	3.03	0.81
Individuals who have not had a strong spiritual base are vulnerable to cultic admission	1%	18%	47%	34%	3.13	0.73
Weak spiritual foundations of young persons will persuade them to cultism	2%	19%	52%	27%	3.05	0.72
Students are enrolling in cult groups with the hope of a better life and realising worldly power.	1%	22%	41%	36%	3.12	0.78
New recruits are susceptible to cultism because of their lack of religious grounding	3%	20%	48%	30%	3.04	0.77

The absence of spiritual commitment to a Church of sound doctrine may invite a student to cultism	2%	22%	44%	33%	3.07	0.78
Twisting of scripture and misinterpretation or selective reading of the Bible makes many students find comfort in entering cult groups	2%	23%	38%	38%	3.11	0.81
It is assumed that cultic movements offer solutions to unfulfilled desires for spiritual meaning.	7%	21%	50%	22%	2.87	0.82
Students are attracted to cults by charismatic leaders who are revered and venerated	3%	25%	37%	35%	3.04	0.84
Theological Grounding					3.06	0.44

Source: Research Data (2023)

A solid theological foundation enables a person to resist any false teaching spread by cultic groups. According to the study, 81 per cent agreed that insufficient religious instruction can entice undergraduates to embrace cultism ($Mean=3.10$; $SD=0.72$). The finding also confirmed that 76 per cent of these participants stated that cultists quickly indoctrinate Christians with superficial scriptural knowledge ($Mean=3.03$; $SD=0.81$). It demonstrates that cultism may readily recruit adherents by exploiting persons who are not firmly founded in Christianity. These findings corroborate Martin's (2003) finding that cults find it far easier to propagate their teachings among young Christians, nominal Christians, and those with merely a cursory experience with the Scriptures. Individuals who are not spiritually and biblically grounded are more likely to be recruited by cultists.

The *interviews* from patrons affirmed that:

"A weak religious base offers a soft landing for cults, for example, lack of Sunday school teaching and training. This is because what children are exposed to in the early stages of their lives shapes them."

They also observed that prosperity gospel sermons, manifestation and impartation topics entice students. Some cults offer training on how to speak in tongues. They restated that:

"Cultic members believe that the C.U. does not offer noisy and psyched-up preachers while cult leaders are performers and induce a lot of fake hope. Finally, cultic groups prefer noisy preachers to cool preachers. They term their preachers as men of God who are miracle workers and prophets. Such preachers are full of fake hope."

The extent of a person's spiritual basis and knowledge of Christianity may determine their susceptibility to cultic recruitment. The study established that 81 per cent opined that individuals who have not had a strong spiritual base are vulnerable to cultic admission ($Mean=3.13$; $SD=0.73$). Similarly, 79 per cent of the sampled participants acknowledged that weak spiritual foundations of young persons would persuade them to cultism ($Mean=3.05$; $SD=0.72$). This means that how well an individual understands biblical teachings determines their susceptibility to cultic admittance. This study agrees with that of Aboribo (1999), who stated that cult leaders control their victims at their weakest spot and that cultism is basically a

spiritual affair. According to Aboribo, most philosophical cults target individuals who are vulnerable, such as the destitute, the oppressed, and the spiritually weak.

Interviews from C.U. patrons showed that scripture twisting was common in cultism, adding that:

“Specifically, cultic preachers quote text in the Bible out of the context and use it to preach what people want to hear, what is appealing. They tend to take some scriptures that are “appealing” to the congregant and leave out others and that individuals who are not committed to a certain church might simply embrace any sort of teaching they encounter.”

The results revealed that the absence of spiritual commitment to a Church of sound doctrine may invite a student to cultism. In a comparable manner, respondents affirmed that new recruits are more vulnerable to cultism because they lack a strong theological foundation. Further patron interview results established that patrons had a problem with the way scriptures are quoted out of context by such cultic groups and the preaching that seeks to please the itching ears. Furthermore, they decried the lack of exposure to true doctrines as making students vulnerable to cultism, such as drilling students to speak in tongues. One patron gave an example of a speaker who came to their service and manipulated students using dress codes such as rugged and tight jeans; some students identified with them.

Individuals who are not committed to a certain church might simply embrace any sort of teaching they encounter. The results revealed that 77 per cent indicated that the absence of spiritual commitment to a Church of sound doctrine might invite a student to cultism ($Mean=3.07$; $SD=0.78$). In a comparable manner, 78 per cent of respondents ($Mean=3.07$; $SD=0.77$) agreed that new recruits are more vulnerable to cultism because they lack a strong theological foundation. This conclusion is consistent with that made by Ongong’a and Akaranga (2013), who assert that learners who lack spiritual life are more likely to change religions. Due to their lack of knowledge of other religions, some students are drawn into cults. Furthermore, according to Ongong’a and Akaranga, those who did not have a strong theological foundation during their early years were more likely to stray from the real religion and become persuaded by cultist ideas.

In an effort to secure their financial future, some people may be compelled by socioeconomic circumstances to join cultic societies. As per the findings, 77 per cent affirmed that students are enrolling in cult groups with the hope of a better life and realising worldly power ($Mean=3.12$; $SD=0.78$). Comparable results, 72 per cent support the idea that many people believe cultic organisations provide answers to the unfulfilled demand for spiritual meaning to an individual ($Mean = 2.87$; $SD = 0.82$).

Many cults have emerged because of incorrect Bible interpretation. The current study recognised that 76 per cent of participants alluded that twisting of scripture and misinterpretation, or selective reading of the Bible, makes many students find comfort in entering cult groups ($Mean=3.11$; $SD=0.81$). This view was supported by 72 per cent of those who were of the opinion that students are attracted to cults by charismatic leaders who are revered and venerated ($Mean=3.04$; $SD=0.84$). According to Coates (2011), individuals join charismatic associations in pursuit of spiritual identity and significance; enrolment in charismatic societies occurs through existing social connections and interpersonal ties, such as colleagues

recruiting friends, family members recruiting one another, and neighbours recruiting neighbours. Largely, theological grounding is observed to influence cultism in public universities ($Mean = 3.06$; $SD = 0.44$).

An interviewee stated that:

"Cults catch students who have a superficial knowledge of the scriptures and that individuals who have not had a strong religious base would be vulnerable and that students with inappropriate spiritual foundations as children might be exposed to cultism."

The patrons decried the spiritual father ideology, where people must listen to new father figures in the churches. They called on the need to have students grounded in the faith. The findings from SGBS leaders indicated that a large majority of the respondents argued that the theological grounding and foundation of students was the biggest determining or causal factor ("mother of all") on the propensity of students joining cults in university. Those who lack sufficient understanding of the scripture are susceptible to cultic doctrines on the desire to have a strong connection with God. Students with weak theological grounding are attracted to cult members who seem to have a higher or stronger spiritual connection to God.

On the manipulation of scripture, cults intentionally misinterpret and manipulate the scripture. Students who have a feeble understanding of scripture fall prey to cults since they cannot distinguish lies from truth. Cults also tend to prioritise different aspects of scripture, such as material possessions or certain books of the Bible. A lack of understanding of all aspects of scripture/weak scriptural foundation by undergraduate students causes them not to identify these disparities in the cultic teachings when they join the cults.

The participants observed that cults use the same Bible but in a warped way to propagate a certain doctrine. Nominal Christians or cultural Christians with no personal faith are easily caught. This lack of knowledge becomes a risk factor. The role of preachers is critical since some twist the scriptures to their end.

Furthermore, participants affirmed that lonely students who lack fellowship are lured into such groups for companionship. The team observed that young believers were vulnerable to cultism. The group observed that cultists are obsessed with and obedient to a leader to the extent of failing to distinguish the leader from God. They reported that they had observed some form of financial exploitation from cultic groups.

They further alluded to the fact that cultists are very defensive, and students involved in cults do not allow questions regarding their faith and easily get infuriated against critics. They also observed that there were some special language jargons and intonations common among cultists that would distinguish them from the rest. Those who are not conversant with scripture are lured more easily than those with a deeper knowledge of the Bible and could easily be manipulated. The FGD alluded to the fact that the pressing financial situations of the family may contribute to the student's sympathy for cultic advances since these groups promise some kind of prosperity. Students from extreme family challenges may find solace in some of the cultic groups which promise assistance.

Participants aver that a lack of sufficient Biblical knowledge can be a major factor that can cause one to be easily lured in. Some believers who are nominal and only churchgoers can be lured in because they lack grounding and a strong foundation. They noted that cults tend to manipulate Biblical passages to address your specific needs. They thus manipulate scriptures to make members feel like a superhuman or a god.

Some students are attracted by the power their leaders display on television. When the leader raises their hand, everyone falls. They want to acquire world power and dominion. Cults were noted to take one thing and make an entire theology and philosophy out of it. They attract students using examples of other cultic members who have already succeeded. They dwell on the money-based scriptures. They claim to anoint the future of their members. They dwell on the unknown. They know what you are looking for, and they promise to deliver it.

The respondents maintained that even some of those with good theological grounding can be recruited into cults. They further insinuated that cults may target Christians, and especially those who are zealous, faithful, and prayerful are also attracted and lured in to serve their purposes.

Respondent observed that the leaders of the Cultic groups are not faithful to the Holy Scriptures but preach what the congregations want to hear. The congregation doesn't question what the man of God preaches due to lack of knowledge. Preachers of Cultic groups twist the scripture to suit the interest of congregants. Preachers in cultic groups indoctrinate members who do not have enough knowledge of the scripture. The use of "altar" language, also known as "*madhabahu*", is a common feature among cultists. Some are told to "*Fungua Mpesa*" for money to flow in.

Pearson Correlations

The Pearson correlation quantifies how much two normally distributed random variables are related or dependent on one another. The association direction is indicated by the sign of r . If r is positive, the tendency is for both variables to rise when one rises. Table 2 shows the analysis results.

Table 2: Correlations for Theological Grounding

		Prevalence of Cultism
Theological Grounding	Pearson Correlation	.599**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	193

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Research Data (2023)

The results recognised a statistically significant relationship between Theological Grounding and the prevalence of cultism ($r=0.599^{**}$; $p<0.05$). This means that low biblical knowledge, church dogma, religiosity and low personal spirituality could affect the prevalence of cultism.

Regression Coefficients

The link between a predictor variable and the responder is described by regression coefficients, which are estimations of the unknown parameters of the population. In order to create models that predict a significant dependent variable from a group of predictor factors, regression is typically used.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	-.111	.207		-.534	.594		
Family Background	.233	.078	.186	2.998	.003	.592	1.691
Socio-Psychological Manipulation	.174	.081	.160	2.159	.032	.412	2.427
Sense of Belonging	.229	.075	.222	3.064	.003	.431	2.323
Theological Grounding	.206	.070	.194	2.924	.004	.515	1.941
Peer Pressure	.210	.080	.180	2.632	.009	.482	2.076
a. Dependent Variable: Prevalence of Cultism							

Source: Research Data (2023)

The regression analysis shows that theological grounding ($\beta=0.194$; $p<0.05$) contributes significantly to the prevalence of cultism.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study concludes that lack of adequate spiritual instruction may turn students to cultism since cults target students with a cursory familiarity with the scriptures, who lack a solid religious foundation and adequate spiritual instruction as children may turn to cults. It was established that cultic charismatic preachers employ selected Bible passages taken out of context to preach what is enticing to their listeners and consequently recruit members. Additionally, students who are not devoted to particular churches of sound doctrine may end up accepting cultic teachings and practices.

Recommendations: The Christian Unions should provide social support and discipleship for their members to shield them from cult recruiters. University Chaplains and C.U. Patrons should vet all preachers who come to the university to mitigate against cultic doctrines and practices. Whereas the constitution of Kenya 2010 protects freedom of worship, there is a need for a policy framework and legislation to check religious excesses and fundamentalism, which may lead to radicalisation and loss of life. The development of the code of conduct for churches to self-regulate should be embraced, accepted and adopted as a means of mitigation against cultism not only in churches but also in public universities and in society in general. The government should employ more well-trained chaplains in universities to help safeguard students in the universities from the onslaught of cultism. This study recommends that university authorities should empower and support the Christian Unions in the universities as a means of monitoring the infiltration of other clandestine religious groups that operate in their universities. This will help to vet the doctrines of the preachers who come to the university. Disciplinary proceedings should be instituted

against culprits, charismatic preachers who peddle false teachings and who abuse, exploit and manipulate students for their selfish ends. University Chaplains, Christian Union patrons and Christian union leaders should be engaged in new students' orientation and prepare induction services where such students are warned about the existence and dangers of cultism in university.

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