

Authentic and Inauthentic Religion in the Thought of Joseph Ratzinger and Rudolf Otto

Author

Anthony Nyoro 

Author's email: anthonynyoro231@gmail.com

Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya.

Cite this article in APA

Nyoro, A. (2026). Authentic and inauthentic religion in the thought of Joseph Ratzinger and Rudolf Otto. *Journal of philosophy and religion*, 5(1), 13–25. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jpr.v5i1.1069>



A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 2026-05-10

Accepted: 2026-06-16

Published: 2026-07-13

Scan this QR to read the paper online



Copyright: ©2026 by the author(s). This article is an Open Access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Abstract

This article examines the distinction between authentic and inauthentic religion through the thought of Joseph Ratzinger and Rudolf Otto, with particular attention to the contemporary proliferation of manipulative religious movements in Kenya. Employing a qualitative philosophical-theological methodology, the study conducts a comparative textual analysis of the primary works of Ratzinger and Otto, supplemented by relevant Church documents, philosophical literature, and selected Kenyan case studies. The study finds that authentic religion is rooted in an encounter with the transcendent and holy God, expressed through genuine worship, sound doctrine, moral transformation, and the harmonious integration of faith and reason. Conversely, inauthentic religious movements are characterised by the manipulation of vulnerable people, excessive emphasis on charismatic leaders, the distortion of the divine into a tool (an object) for human interests, and practices that undermine human dignity. The findings further reveal that ignorance, desperation, and the separation of faith from reason contribute significantly to religious exploitation. The article concludes that authentic religious experience safeguards both God's transcendence and human dignity, and recommends greater theological formation among believers, alongside prudent government regulation of religious organisations to protect religious freedom, human dignity, and the common good.

Key terms: Authentic religion, faith and reason, human dignity, religious experience, religious manipulation.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Kenya has witnessed a rapid proliferation of religious organisations that aim to significantly change the human encounter with the transcendent God, evoking faith, worship and personal transformation, with more than 4,000 registered churches operating across the country. It is through this religion, grounded in a genuine encounter with the transcendent God, expressed through true worship, sound doctrine, and moral transformation, that a complementary relationship exists in which divine revelation and human rational inquiry work together to discern religious truth and safeguard authentic belief.

While this growth reflects the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion, it has also raised serious concerns regarding accountability, doctrinal integrity, and the protection of vulnerable believers. This study examines the distinction between authentic and inauthentic religion through the thought of Joseph Ratzinger and Rudolf Otto, with particular attention to the contemporary proliferation of manipulative religious movements in Kenya. The 2023 Shakahola tragedy, in which hundreds of followers of Paul Mackenzie's *Good News International Church* died after being instructed to starve themselves, exposed the devastating consequences of religious manipulation the exploitation of religious beliefs, authority, or practices by leaders to control, deceive, or exploit individuals for personal gain at the expense of human dignity, which as a result reignited national debate on the regulation of religious organisations. In response, the government established a Presidential Taskforce and proposed the Religious Organisations Bill, 2024, to strengthen oversight while safeguarding religious freedom.

Based on this information, we cannot help but ask ourselves: Why are so many churches popping up in our country? What needs are existing churches unable to meet? Are all these churches genuine? Are their leaders authentic? What explains people's willingness to follow a newly established church or religious leader? By integrating Ratzinger's theology of worship with Otto's phenomenology of religion, this article contributes a philosophical-theological framework for evaluating religious authenticity within the contemporary Kenyan context.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarly works have examined religion from theological, phenomenological, and sociological perspectives. Rudolf Otto (1958) understands authentic religion as arising from humanity's encounter with the numinous, the "Wholly Other," experienced in awe, reverence, and dependence. Ratzinger (2000, 2004), by contrast, argues that authentic worship is grounded in God's self-revelation and maintained through the harmony of faith and reason. Sociological studies of new religious movements emphasise charismatic authority, religious commitment, and the potential for manipulation when accountability is absent (Weber, 1963; Barker, 1984; Hassan, 2015). Recent Kenyan scholarship and public discourse, particularly following the Shakahola tragedy, have renewed concern over religious exploitation and the need to distinguish authentic religion from manipulative religious movements (Akello, 2023). Although these studies provide important insights into religion and religious experience, little attention has been paid to engaging Ratzinger's theological perspective in dialogue with Otto's phenomenology to develop criteria for evaluating authentic and inauthentic religion in the contemporary Kenyan context. This study addresses that gap.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative philosophical-theological research design based on textual and comparative analysis. The design is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret philosophical and theological concepts rather than generate statistical findings. Primary works by Joseph Ratzinger and Rudolf Otto are comparatively analysed alongside relevant church documents, philosophical literature, and selected Kenyan case studies to identify the characteristics of authentic and inauthentic religion and demonstrate their contemporary relevance.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

What does it mean to be Religious?

In *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council Fathers teach that "from ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history ...this perception and recognition penetrates their lives with profound religious sense." (Second Vatican Council, 1965, para. 2).

Thus, religion may be defined as the means by which God, as Spirit, and man's essential self-communicate. It is something resulting from the relationship between God and the human person. Therefore, it concerns the very being of the individual's personal relationship with God, the Creator. This relationship, expressed religiously, is the one we refer to as the religious experience (Kasyoka, 2008, p.13).

Religious Experience in the Thought of Ratzinger

In his famous work, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 2000, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger devoted the first chapter to defining worship (how we encounter God as human persons). His writings on the topic, to the best of my understanding, are of great value for our understanding of religious experience.

In this text, Ratzinger holds that "the manner in which God is to be worshipped contains its measure within itself; that is, it can only be ordered by the measure of revelation, in dependency upon God" (Ratzinger, 2000, p. 16). True worship of God is to worship Him in the way he himself desires. Cult, liturgy in the proper sense, is part of this worship, but so too is life according to the will of God; such a life is an indispensable part of true worship (Ratzinger, 2000). As Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (1992) says, "the glory of God is the living man, but the life of man is the vision of God" (St. Irenaeus of Lyons, 1992, *Adv. Haer.* 4, 20, 7). Thus, getting to the heart of what happens when man meets God on the 'mountain in the wilderness.'

Ultimately, it is the very life of man, man himself as living righteously, that is the true worship of God, but life only becomes real life when it receives its form from looking toward God. Cult exists to communicate this vision and to give life in such a way that glory is given to God.

What kind of reality, then, do we find in worship? According to Ratzinger (2000), worship, that is, the right kind of cult, a relationship with God, is essential to the right kind of human existence in the world (Ratzinger, 2000). It is precise because it reaches beyond everyday life. Worship gives us a share in heaven's mode of existence, in the world of God, and allows light to fall from that divine world into ours. In this sense, worship has the character of anticipation (Ratzinger, 2000). It lays hold of a more perfect life in advance and, in so doing, gives our present life its proper measure.

A life without such anticipation, a life no longer opened up to heaven, would be empty, a leaden life. That is why, in reality, no society is altogether lacking in cult. Even the decidedly atheistic, materialistic systems create their own forms of cult, though, of course, they can only be illusions and, by bombastic trumpeting, strive in vain to conceal their nothingness (Ratzinger, 2000).

In Ratzinger's final reflection, man himself cannot simply "make" worship (Ratzinger, 2000). If God does not reveal himself, man is clutching at space. Moses words to Pharaoh: "We do not know with what we must serve the Lord," (Ex 10:26) display a fundamental law of all worship. When God does not reveal himself, man can, of course, from the sense of God within him, build altars "to the unknown god" (cf. Acts 17:23). He can reach out toward God in his thinking and try to feel his way toward him. But real worship implies that God responds and reveals how we can worship him. In any form, worship includes some 'institution' (Guardini, 1998) as "if it springs from imagination, our own creativity – then it would remain just a cry in the dark or mere self-affirmation" (Guardini, 1998, p. 8) Worship implies a real relationship with another, who reveals himself to us and gives our existence a new direction (Guardini, 1998).

In the Old Testament, there is a series of very impressive testimonies to the truth that worship is not a matter of "what you please." Nowhere is this more dramatically evident than in the narrative of the golden calf (strictly speaking, 'bull calf') (Ratzinger, 2000). The cult conducted by the high priest Aaron is not meant to serve any of the false gods. The apostasy is more subtle. There is no obvious turning away from God to the false gods, as "outwardly, the people remain completely attached to the same God. They want to glorify the God who led Israel out of Egypt and believe that they may very properly represent his mysterious power in the image of a bull calf" (Ratzinger, 2000, p. 20).

Everything seems to be in order. Presumably, even the ritual is in full conformity with the rubrics. And yet it is slipping from the worship of God into idolatry (Ratzinger, 2000). This apostasy, outwardly scarcely perceptible, has two causes. First, there is a violation of the prohibition of images. The people cannot cope with the invisible, remote, and mysterious God. They want to bring him down into their own world, into what they can see and understand. Worship is no longer going up to God but drawing God down into one's world. He must be there when he is needed, and he must be the kind of God that is needed. Man is using God, and, in reality, even if it is not outwardly discernible, he is placing himself above God (Guardini, 1998). This gives us a clue to the second point.

The worship of the golden calf is a self-generated cult (Ratzinger, 2000). When Moses stays away for too long, and God himself becomes inaccessible, the people fetch him back. Worship becomes a feast that the community gives itself, a festival of self-affirmation. Instead of being worship of God, it becomes a circle closed in on itself: eating, drinking and making merry. The dance around the golden calf is an image of this self-seeking worship. It is a kind of banal self-gratification (Ratzinger, 2000). This narration is a warning against any self-initiated and self-seeking worship. Ultimately, it is no longer concerned with God but with creating a nice little alternative world of one's own making.

Then worship really does become pointless, just fooling around. Or still worse, it becomes an apostasy from the living God, an apostasy in sacral disguise. All that is left in the end is frustration, a feeling of emptiness. There is no experience of that liberation which always takes place when man encounters the living God.

Religious Experience in the Thought of Rudolf Otto

In his work, *Das Heilige (The Idea of the Holy)*, Rudolf Otto, a man who had travelled and encountered various religions, sought to bring out what is common in all genuine religions. Central to his thought is the religious experience. Otto applauds the efforts of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was convinced that "religion arises not in our intellectual faculties but in the feelings of utter dependence that a finite creature experiences when faced with its own finitude and contingency" (Schleiermacher, 1958, xix).

Rudolf Otto, applauding Schleiermacher, describes the religious experience of the numinous as follows: "Schleiermacher has the credit of isolating a very important element in such an experience. This is the 'feeling of dependence.'...the feeling or emotion which he really has in mind in this phrase is in its specific quality not a 'feeling of dependence' in the 'natural' sense of the word" (Otto, 1958, p. 9). Thus, religion arises in feelings of utter dependence, devotion and awe.

According to Otto, this devotion, dependence or awe is always directed towards the "Holy", the *Das Heilige* (Otto, 1958). For Otto, "Holy" does not mean moral perfection or ethical purity, but that which is separate and unapproachable, that which is set apart and distinct from the human person (Otto, 1958). He coined the word "numinous" from Latin *Numen*, meaning divine power and divine will (Otto, 1958).

Rudolf Otto argues that the experience of the numinous is difficult to describe, although it is basic to all religions (Otto, 1958). When Otto uses the expression 'the numinous feeling' (das numinose Gefühl), he must not be taken merely to be reducing it to 'affect', a subjective emotion, in any genuine religious experience. Otto refers to an objective reality (Otto, 1958), not merely a subjective feeling in the mind; and he uses the word feeling in this connection not as equivalent to emotion but as a form of awareness that is neither that of ordinary perceiving nor of ordinary conceiving (Otto, 1958).

Rudolf Otto describes the experience of 'numinous' as a *Mysterium Tremendum* (the tremendous mystery). *Tremendum* involves notions of power and might. The sense of *tremendum* involves elements of awesomeness, overpoweringness and energy. Corresponding to these qualities are the subjective responses of dread, insignificance and impotence (Otto, 1958). A good example is the encounter of Prophet Isaiah with God, "At the sound of that cry, the frame of the door shook, and the house was filled with smoke. Then I said, "Woe is me; I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." (Isaiah. 6:4 – 5).

According to Otto, "*mysterium* denotes merely that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar" (Otto, 1958, p.13) Taken in a religious sense, Otto holds that the most striking expression is 'Wholly Other', "that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the 'canny', and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment" (Otto, 1958, p.13).

Therefore, for Otto, a religious experience must be that which reason cannot fully grasp because of its limitations, as it contains an overplus of meaning that is non-rational, neither counter-reason on the one hand nor above reason on the other (Otto, 1958). The two elements, the rational and the non-rational, have to be regarded (in his favourite simile) as the warp and the woof of the complete fabric, neither of which can dispense with the other.

While Otto provides a phenomenological account of religious experience, Ratzinger offers a theological framework rooted in divine revelation. Together, their perspectives provide complementary criteria for evaluating religious authenticity.

Characteristics of an Authentic Religion

Drawing on the complementary insights of Ratzinger and Otto, several objective characteristics emerge that distinguish authentic religion from inauthentic religion. Ratzinger's thought on Divine Revelation and Otto's experience of the Holy converge in affirming that genuine religion directs the human person toward the transcendent God rather than toward merely human interests.

Among the common characteristics of authentic religions are the following:

Consistency and Universality

A genuine religion neither depends on one's feelings nor appeals to just a few people (Kasyoka, 2008). Consistency refers to the fact that the beliefs, teachings, and moral principles of a religion do not contradict one another. It also denotes that worship does not change with every new leader.

Universality, on the other hand, denotes that religion speaks to the whole human condition and is relevant to all people regardless of culture, race, class, or historical period. Its truths are not merely local customs or tribal beliefs, but claims about reality and human existence that can, in principle, concern everyone (Kasyoka, 2008).

Sense of 'Holy' or 'the Sacred'

A religion has to focus on the Sacred, that which is opposed to secular or profane; something revered for its own sake (Otto, 1958). Rudolf Otto speaks of the 'numinous', that is, something beyond rational and ethical conceptions, a mystery above all creatures, something hidden and esoteric which can be experienced in feelings (Otto, 1958).

Inclusion of Faith, Whether Explicit or Implicit

The content of faith may differ from one religion to another, but there cannot be religion in the real sense of the term without some self-consciousness and reflective awareness of the Holy, the Sacred, and the Ultimate, who is God (Kasyoka, 2008).

Beliefs

Some beliefs may be popular while some are official doctrines, the dogmas or creeds of a particular religion (Kasyoka, 2008). For the Christian religion, doctrine, worship and deeds are three major factors that are combined. These factors are intertwined, and they strengthen each other.

Moral Behaviour Consistent with Beliefs

It is factual that morality is not the criterion for religiosity. However, it greatly contributes, since a religious person should not only be seen as moral but also uphold morality as their main character; otherwise, their religiosity will not be authentic (Kasyoka, 2008).

Why Do People Fall Prey to Many Inauthentic Religions or Even Sects?

Based on our understanding of religious experience, aided by Joseph Ratzinger's and Rudolf Otto's thoughts, we conclude that among the reasons people are led astray by inauthentic religions are as follows:

The Question of Human Autonomy

Too often, Christianity is perceived as a narrow system of duties and obligations, marked by legalism and scrupulosity, and forbidding what makes life enjoyable (Murphy, 2013). For many cultures, Christianity is a scandal and foolishness: "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1: 22 – 23).

This attitude makes one exclude God from one's life. One goes about his/her life without any reference to an absolute principle that transcends the values of the individual and of the human species in the name of 'freedom'. His Holiness Benedict XVI, in *Deus Caritas Est*, teaches that "... being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or lofty idea, but an encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (Benedict XVI, 2005).

Robert Cardinal Sarah (2015) reminds us that, although Christianity cannot be reduced to morality, it nevertheless has moral consequences; love and faith give man a new orientation, depth, and breadth. Man leaves the darkness of his past life. His life is enlightened by the light that is Christ. He lives by Christ's life. From now on, he can walk only in the company of Jesus, who is light, truth, and life. After his encounter with Jesus, a real Christian changes his conduct (Sarah, 2015).

Absolutism of the Human Reason

Between the 17th and 18th centuries, Europe experienced a rebirth of intellectual inquiry, led by prominent philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Voltaire, and John Locke (Gay, 1997). These thinkers critically questioned the role of Christian Faith and Dogma in shaping societal beliefs.

They argued that human reason, critical thinking, and scientific inquiry should serve as the primary sources of knowledge and authority. In doing so, "they effectively rejected the truths communicated by Christian Faith through Divine Revelation, since such truths are metaphysical and therefore cannot be empirically verified. This movement of thought is what is now known as the Enlightenment" (Gay, 1977, p. 23).

By asserting that only what can be empirically verified constitutes legitimate authority, the Enlightenment diminished Christianity's authority in Western civilisation (Makumba, 2017). Unintentionally, it also laid the intellectual groundwork for scientism: the belief that only the natural sciences are valid sources of genuine knowledge (Ratzinger, 2004). Metaphysical and theological sources are considered secondary or meaningless.

The Question of the Authority of Jesus Christ

Is Jesus Christ an ideal or a historical person? Is he divine or purely human? Are the miracles described in the Gospels legendary or real-life events? (Ratzinger, 2004). This theological inquiry, when left unaided, often leads to scepticism about Christian faith.

For the first time, groups of African Traditional Religions have emerged in Africa; one example is *Ngwata Ndai*, which is dominant in central Kenya. They hold that missionaries brainwashed Africans by bringing Christianity (Mbiti, 1990). They aspire to bring back the ancient religious way of the primitive African: sacrificing animals to the gods, circumcision of both young men and women, primitive communion with the ancestors, and practices which are archaic and contrary to human dignity.

Theoretical atheists such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Richard Dawkins exemplify influential critics whose interpretations of Jesus Christ and his teachings differ fundamentally from the Christian understanding of the human person and human flourishing (Makumba, 2017).

Desperation and Vulnerability of the Victims

Inauthentic religious leaders, such as Pastor Kanyari's *Salvation Healing Ministry* and its "mbegu ya 310"; Pastor Awour's *Ministry of Repentance and Holiness* and its "HIV/AIDS" miracles; and Paul Mackenzie's *Good News International Church* and its "starving to see Jesus Christ" (Akello, 2023), to name a few in Kenya among many, have something in common. They have all targeted persons who are in great desperation and vulnerable.

Illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and cancer drain families economically, and in the hearing of a healing miracle, such persons cannot hesitate (Akello, 2023). Persons in broken families and those struggling to make an independent living also consist of vulnerable persons, and they fall prey to these inauthentic religious leaders, who cheat and steal in the name of God (Standard Media, 2026).

Illiteracy is an added advantage to the inauthentic leaders. Religions such as *Diniya Msabwa* by Masinde Muliro, Jehova wa Nyonyi, and Yesu wa Togaren, to mention a few, serve as examples of how manipulation is used to exploit their followers, in effect, their ignorance, to understand the world and themselves (Akello, 2023).

Red Flags for Inauthentic Religion(s)

Many manipulative religious movements exhibit common characteristics. Such religions, instead of fulfilling man's desire to commune with the Absolute, alienate the individual from authentic religious experience, and secondly, from that Absolute they claim to bring. Among the common characteristics of inauthentic religion are:

Too Much Emphasis on the Leader

The leader of such sects overshadows the Absolute (Weber, 1963). He is the centre of worship. He is referred to as the "Prophet", "Man of God", "Apostle", among names that clearly indicate he is different from the worshippers. He communicates with God, and he (the leader) determines the fate of the worshippers (Tillich, 1951). There exists no direct relationship between the believer and the Absolute; all has to be mediated by the "Man of God".

In such a sect, the experience of the *Numinous* by Rudolf Otto does not exist; that is, one fails to experience the *Mysterium tremendum*. The subjective responses of dread, insignificance and impotence, as those experienced by Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6: 4 – 5) in the encounter with the "Wholly Other", are lacking.

Immanence over Transcendence

God transcends the world; he is distinguished from it as the infinitely perfect. To transcend is to be beyond, above, or surpassing another. Its opposite is immanence, which indicates that something is closed in on itself.

Transcendence presupposes immanence as one of its moments, which transcendence surpasses: humans can only experience God's transcendence through some form of divine presence within experience (Tillich, 1951). God must in some way become present to consciousness (immanence) for humans to recognise that He infinitely exceeds them (transcendence) (Tillich, 1951).

As earlier revealed in Joseph Ratzinger's thought, if God were only transcendent, humans could never encounter Him; likewise, if God were only immanent, He would become merely another object in the world (Ratzinger, 2000).

Therefore, the "Holy" involves a paradox: God is near, yet infinitely beyond us at the same time (Tillich, 1951). This balance is what gives religious experience its unique character of awe, dependence, fascination, and reverence.

However, in inauthentic sects, immanence overshadows transcendence. The concept of the Absolute is purely immanent. God is an object that fulfils only the desires and wants of the leader on behalf of the "believers." Teachings such as "panda mbegu ya 310", "Come to me and I will cure your illness", "God told me you have to starve to death to see him", are a few among many others that show how the aspect of transcendence lacks in inauthentic sects.

Being too Personal

Inauthentic sects and their manipulative leaders use forced intimacy to bypass one's boundaries (Hassan, 2015). They demand confessions about one's sexual history, employment and financial details, and one's relationship with one's family, among other personal information. Sharing such information creates an immediate rapport between the leader and the victim. By doing this, the leader creates a crisis and then behaves as the only one with the medication to the 'problem' (Hassan, 2015).

Once sensibility is struck, there is little possibility for reflection and little capacity for analysis. Manipulation sets in, and the victim now dances to the leader's tune. This was the case with Reverend Sun Myung Moon and his Unification Church, where he controlled most intimate choices of his believers: sex, marriage and kids (Barker, 1984).

Isolation

Manipulative sect leaders isolate the victims from public life (Hassan, 2015). They indoctrinate their followers that the world is full of evil, and to be on the safe side, they have to live isolated from it. One cuts off their own family members and friends. In such circumstances, the leader has full control of the victim's life (Hassan, 2015).

The incident in Jonestown in November 1978, at the *Peoples Temple Church* by Jim Jones, where Congressman Leo Ryan visited the town after claims that people were being held there against their will, exemplifies how isolation is a manipulative tool in inauthentic sects (Reiterman & Jacobs, 1982).

In the late 1970s, Jim Jones moved many of the followers to an agricultural settlement called Jonestown in Guyana. Families in California had reported to authorities that their relatives had been missing and their passports confiscated (Reiterman & Jacobs, 1982). In November 1978, Congressman Leo Ryan travelled to Jonestown with journalists and concerned relatives to investigate conditions there.

Knowing what was happening, Leo Ryan and several of his companions were shot dead, and the leader, Jim Jones, ordered the 'White Night', a mass murder-suicide where 909 people died, including 304 children, by drinking Flavour Aid laced with cyanide (Reiterman & Jacobs, 1982). This serves as just one indication among many of how people are lured in the name of religious practices; manipulation up to death in the name of God.

Remedy to Inauthentic Sects and Their Leaders

It is an irrefutable truth that evil has to co-exist with good, as by its definition, evil itself is not a substance but a privation of the good that ought to be there. By the mere fact that the good of why any genuine religion exists, that is, to connect the human person to the Absolute truth, good and beautiful, is always lacking in inauthentic sects, it necessarily follows that they are evil.

The question remains: how do we counter this evil? These two ways are among others:

Faith and Reason (*Fides et Ratio*)

God, in creating man, bestowed him with rationality, differentiating him from brutes. Man is capable of thinking for himself and, through reason, reaching the truth (Makumba, 2017). Therefore, any true religious attitude has to be reasonable. There should not be any contradiction whatsoever between sincere religious faith and reason (Kasyoka, 2008).

In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "...the faith of the Church has always insisted that between God and us, between his eternal Creator Spirit and our created reason, there exists a real analogy, in which – as the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 stated – unlikeness remains infinitely greater than likeness, yet not to the point of abolishing analogy and its language. God does not become more divine when we push him away from us in a sheer, impenetrable voluntarism; rather, the truly divine God is the God who has revealed himself as *logos* and, as *logos*, has acted and continues to act lovingly on our behalf" (Benedict XVI, 2006, para. 6).

Thus, the right relationship between faith and reason is one of teamwork. Religion becomes superstition and is cruel to human welfare unless it accepts the rigorous methods of inquiry that reason demonstrates. Likewise, reason becomes superficial and dangerous without careful attention to its moral and religious roots. Both naturalism and supernaturalism are needed; they are needed together. The joint light they can shed on the mystery of existence is far more revealing than any other single light can be (Trueblood, 1957, Cit. 218).

Every person is responsible for assessing if the religion he or she is about to join is consistent with human reason. Religious practices that threaten human dignity, operate through isolation and manipulation of their members, and the glorification of the leader overshadowing the sense of the Absolute are inauthentic as they are opposed to reason. One should refrain from joining them.

The Role of the Kenyan Government

The Constitution of Kenya, 2010 begins with the following words in the preamble: "We, the people of Kenya - ..." (Constitution of the Republic of Kenya, 2010, p. 11). These words talk volumes about what our country is. It belongs to all citizens. The laws, rights and freedoms reflect the common desire for a good livelihood and human flourishing in our nation.

With these words, 'We the people of Kenya', in Article 32 of our Constitution, we have founded the freedom of worship. This Article states as follows: "(1) Every person has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion. (2) Every person has the right, either individually or in community with others, in public or in private, to manifest any religion or belief through worship, practice, teaching or observance, including observance of a day of worship. (3) A person may not be denied access to any institution, employment or facility, or the enjoyment of any right, because of the person's belief or religion. (4) A person shall not be compelled to act, or engage in any act, that is contrary to the person's belief or religion."

To the best of my knowledge, this remains one of the most misused and misunderstood Articles of our Constitution, as exemplified by the crisis which inauthentic sects have brought to our nation. Recent examples are the Shakahola forest massacre of April 2023, associated with Pastor Paul Mackenzie and the miraculous healing of HIV/AIDS and related illnesses by Prophet Awour, as described by the current Cabinet Secretary of Health, Adan Duale, on 4th January 2026 (The Standard, 4th January 2026).

The solution to the problem is still our Constitution, where "We the people of Kenya", in Article 24, on limitations of rights and fundamental freedoms, we together hold that, "A right or fundamental freedom in the Bill of Rights shall not be limited except by law, and then only to the extent that the limitation is reasonable and justifiable in an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom, taking into account all relevant factors..." Thus, from our study in the previous pages, we clearly see that there exists a need to limit how religious sects arise and operate to ensure the safety and flourishing of all our people.

In addressing the aforementioned problem, we should consider the following question: who should be licensed as an authentic leader of a religion? Which criteria should he meet to obtain government licensing? What is the relationship between the government and religious institutions? Whatever road our discussions will take, at the end of the day, we'll have to agree that a certain academic qualification on the part of the leader and a certain kind of diplomacy, that which connects the government and the religious institution, are vital, if the 'we' of the 'We people of Kenya' on protecting life is to be a true reality in our country.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Having discussed in depth the religious reality as we experience it in our country, Kenya, and the world at large, we affirm that religion is an inalienable part of human existence, since the human person is by nature a religious being. However, as we have demonstrated in our work, not all 'religions' are authentic. Some religious leaders have exploited humanity's search for communion with the Absolute for personal gain.

These inauthentic religious leaders have misled many innocent people and caused great harm in society. The solution to this problem lies, first, in the responsibility of every individual to become knowledgeable about what constitutes authentic religious experience, and second, in the responsibility of the government to establish clear regulations and standards for those seeking recognition or licensing as leaders of religious groups.

By bringing the insights of Joseph Ratzinger and Rudolf Otto into dialogue with contemporary Kenyan religious realities, this study provides philosophical-theological criteria for discerning authentic religious experience from manipulative forms of religion. It thereby contributes to ongoing discussions on religious freedom, human dignity, and the responsible exercise of religious leadership.

6.0 REFERENCES

1. Akello, I. (2023, April 25). Why did 73 Kenyan cult members starve to death? *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/25/why-did-73-kenya-cult-members-starve-to-death>
2. Barker, E. (1984). *The making of a Moonie: Brainwashing or choice?* Blackwell.
3. Benedict XVI. (2005, December 25). *Deus Caritas Est* (Encyclical letter). Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html
4. Benedict XVI. (2006, September 12). *Faith, reason and the university: Memories and reflections* (Regensburg address). Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html
5. Gay, P. (1977). *The Enlightenment: An interpretation. Volume 1: The rise of modern paganism*. W. W. Norton & Company.
6. Guardini, R. (1998). *The spirit of the liturgy*. Crossroad Publishing.
7. Hassan, S. (2015). *Combating cult mind control* (Rev. ed.). Park Street Press.
8. *Holy Bible, New International Version*. (2011). Bible Gateway. <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/>
9. Irenaeus of Lyons. (1992). *Against heresies* (D. J. Unger & J. J. Dillon, Trans.). Paulist Press. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm>
10. Kasyoka, J. M. M. (2008). *An introduction to philosophy of religion*. Zapf Publications.
11. Makumba, M. M. (2017). *Natural theology: With African annotations*. Paulines Publications Africa.
12. Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.
13. Murphy, J. (2013). *Christ our joy: The theological vision of Pope Benedict XVI*. St. Paul's.
14. Otto, R. (1958). *The idea of the holy* (J. W. Harvey, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
15. Ratzinger, J. (2000). *The spirit of the liturgy*. Ignatius Press.
16. Ratzinger, J. (2004). *Introduction to Christianity* (2nd ed.). Ignatius Press.
17. Reiterman, T., & Jacobs, J. (1982). *Raven: The untold story of Rev. Jim Jones and his people*. Dutton.
18. Republic of Kenya. (2010). *The Constitution of Kenya, 2010*. Government Printer.

19. Sarah, R. (2015). *God or nothing*. Ignatius Press.
20. Schleiermacher, F. (1958). *On religion: Speeches to its cultured despisers* (J. Oman, Trans.). Harper & Row.
21. Second Vatican Council. (1965, October 28). *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions). Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html
22. The Standard. (2026, January 4). *The Standard*. <https://epaper.standardmedia.co.ke/issue/4240>
23. Tillich, P. (1951). *Systematic theology* (Vol. 1). University of Chicago Press.
24. Trueblood, D. E. (1957). *Philosophy of religion*. Harper & Brothers.
25. Weber, M. (1963). *The sociology of religion*. Beacon Press.