

Selections of Karl Heinrich Marx Views on Religion in View of Paul Nthenge Mackenzie Shakahola Cult

Prof. Rev. Manya Wandefu Stephen¹, Dr. Osabwa Wycliffe²

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Alupe University, Busia, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The 2023 Shakahola tragedy involving Paul Nthenge Mackenzie, whose followers died through starvation in Kilifi County, Kenya, raises urgent questions about the relationship between religion, social vulnerability, and authority. This paper applies Karl Marx's theory of religion; particularly the notion of religion as the "opium of the people" to analyze how religious belief can function simultaneously as a response to suffering and a mechanism of control. Rather than treating the case solely as an example of "cult behavior," the study situates it within broader socio-economic conditions that make individuals susceptible to religious manipulation. In the Mackenzie situation, many people rushed to join this starving religious group claiming that it was their religious duty. Notably, Pastor Nthenge and his followers displayed quasi-religious beliefs akin to Cults. For instance, Pastor Nthenge had isolated over 200 adults and children from their friends and family and led them to the expansive Shakahola forest in Lamu, Kenya, for prayers and intensive fasting that led to death. Thus, the cultic nature of his teachings, which did not permit any scepticism or questioning lest one got punished, required inordinate sacrifices. Fasting and money from the followers were demanded, with the victims being closely controlled in a way that is not common with most conventional religious groups. Pursuant to these events, one would want to inquire on how Pastor Nthenge's imaginary religious actions echo the selected thoughts of the 19th-century German philosopher Karl Marx's understanding of religion. Instructively, Marx viewed religion as "the soul of soulless conditions" or the "opium of the people". Accordingly, religion in this world of exploitation is an expression of distress and at the same time a protest against the real distress as with the people proselytized by Pastor Nthenge. In other words, Marx saw religion continuing to survive because of oppressive social conditions of the people. This paper consequently examines the emerging theoretical nexus between Pastor Nthenge's view of religion, and Marx's perspectives on religion as the opium of the masses. Through a qualitative desk review of emerging reports and scholarly literature, the paper argues that the Shakahola phenomenon reflects both Marx's insight into religion as an expression of distress and the dangers of its instrumentalization by charismatic leaders. The study concludes by engaging counter-arguments that emphasize religion's positive social functions, thereby offering a balanced and critical perspective.

Keywords: Cult, Shakahola, Religion, Instrumentalization

INTRODUCTION

The deaths associated with the Shakahola forest in 2023 prompted widespread debate about whether Paul Nthenge Mackenzie should be understood primarily as a cult leader or as a religious actor operating within the borders of the socio-economic conditions. While the label "cult" captures elements of isolation, control, and extremism, it risks obscuring deeper structural dynamics. This paper argues that the Shakahola case is best understood through Karl Marx's theory of religion as both an expression of social suffering and a tool that can reproduce that suffering. Specifically, it contends that Mackenzie's movement reflects how religious belief can emerge from conditions of marginalization while simultaneously being manipulated to sustain authority and control. Cult dynamics are therefore treated not as the central focus but as mechanisms through which this process operates.

Cultism and socio-economic Control

Is Pastor Paul Nthenge Mackenzie¹ a Cult leader? To answer the above question on the lips of many in Kenya and around the world, an appreciation of what a cult is as well as a brief overview of Cult leaders around the world is apt. A Cult² is a small religious group that is not part of a larger and more accepted religion and that has beliefs regarded by many people as extreme or precarious. Cults are usually headed by a powerful leader who isolates members from the rest of society. Most individuals do not recognize that the group they are joining is considered a Cult (Lofland, 1977). Individuals who are attracted to groups that are considered Cults may have certain vulnerabilities that make them more likely to join, such as poverty, anxiety or even substance abuse problems. Once they join a group, they are usually distanced from outside influences. Once people are isolated from the outside world, it becomes difficult for one to leave the group. They often grow dependent on being in the group and develop suspicions of anyone outside the group. This is why some people suspect that Cult members are "brainwashed." Ideally, there is some science³ behind this phenomenon, as members are often made to believe that any external interference equals persecution.

Globally, examples of a sample of cult leaders abound. They include Charles Manson⁴ who is known to have isolated⁵ a group of young people and referred to them as his family. Manson expressed his ideas about an imminent race war, and instructed his followers to go on a killing spree. One night, in 1969, several followers murdered five people, including actress Sharon Tate. Manson was later convicted of first-degree murder. We also have Jim Jones⁶ who founded The People's Temple in Indianapolis in 1955. He moved his followers to Eureka, California, out of fear that a nuclear attack might strike Indiana. He later moved his followers to Guyana, to an area which became known as Jonestown. An official went to investigate the group in 1978 after the government grew concerned that some members were being abused. The group shot and killed the official. Jones then instructed his followers to drink flavour aid laced with cyanide. Over 900 people died, including Jones, who was found with a bullet wound on the head. Years later we would have the emergence of Heaven's Gate⁷ which was a group that started in the 1970s. It was known as a "UFO" religious cult. The tightly knit group required members to give up almost all of their possessions. In March of 1997, 39 members put on matching dark clothes, ingested barbiturates, placed plastic bags over their heads and killed themselves. This

¹ An appreciation of, Shaw, Daniel. 2013. *Traumatic Narcissism: Relational systems of subjugation*. Routledge. Is critical. This book is helpful in understanding the psychology of the leader.

² In recent years, the word cult has been most commonly used as a pejorative term for a religious group that falls outside the mainstream and, by implication, engages in questionable activities. Many new religions are controversially labelled as cults.

³ The concept of brainwashing is not now generally accepted as a scientific fact. In casual speech, "brainwashing" and its verb form, "brainwash", are used figuratively to describe the use of propaganda to persuade or sway public opinion.

⁴ Was an American criminal and musician who led the Manson Family, a cult based in California, in the late 1960s. Some of the members committed a series of nine murders at four locations in July and August 1969. In 1971, Manson was convicted of first-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder for the deaths of seven people, including the film actress Sharon Tate. The prosecution contended that, while Manson never directly ordered the murders, his ideology constituted an overt act of conspiracy.

⁵ This is an important feature of a cult. Members are withdrawn from a sinful community and secluded in an area for alleged prayers and devotion to the almighty in anticipation for heavenly reward.

⁶ James Warren Jones (May 13, 1931 – November 18, 1978) better known as Jim Jones was an American preacher and political activist who led the Peoples Temple between 1955 and 1978. In what he called "revolutionary suicide", Jones and the members of his inner circle orchestrated a mass murder-suicide in his remote jungle commune at Jonestown, Guyana, on November 18, 1978. Jones and the events that occurred at Jonestown have had a defining influence on society's perception of cults.

⁷ Heaven's Gate was an American new religious movement (often described as a cult) whose members committed mass suicide in 1997. It was founded in 1974 and led by Bonnie Nettles (1927–1985) and Marshall Applewhite (1931–1997), known within the movement as Ti and Do, respectively. Nettles and Applewhite first met in 1972 and went on a journey of spiritual discovery, identifying themselves as the two witnesses of revelation, attracting a following of several hundred people in the mid-1970s. In 1976, a core group of a few dozen members stopped recruiting and instituted a monastic lifestyle.

was one of the largest mass suicides in United States' history. David Koresh⁸ thought he could have conversations with God and he convinced his followers the world was ending. He and more than 100 people moved to a compound outside of Waco, Texas. The FBI tried to arrest Koresh in 1993 because of violations of the law, such as advocating marriage of underage girls to adult men. This led to a 51-day standoff with authorities. Ultimately, 75 people from the group died. Like Jim Jones, Koresh was found dead with a gunshot wound to the head thus solidifying the ideas of Singer, M.T. and J. Lalich in 1995 about cults in our midst.

Closer home, in Uganda and related to the current topic, the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God was a religious movement founded by Credonia Mwerinde and Joseph Kibweteere in south-western part of the country is worth considering. They claimed that they had seen visions of the Virgin Mary. In early 2000, followers of this religious movement died in a fire and a series of poisonings and killings that were initially considered a group suicide. It was later determined to be a mass murder by the group's leaders after their predictions of the apocalypse failed to come about. The goals of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God were to obey the Ten Commandments and preach the word of Jesus Christ. They taught that to avoid damnation in the apocalypse; one had to strictly follow the Commandments. The emphasis on the Commandments was so strong that the group discouraged speaking, for fear of breaking the Ninth Commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour". Occasionally, communication was only conducted in sign language. Fasting was conducted regularly, with only one being taken on Fridays and Mondays. Sex was forbidden, as was soap, (Fisher,2000). The group had a strong emphasis on an apocalyptic end time, highlighted by their booklet, *A Timely Message from Heaven: The End of the Present Time*, Cauvin, (2000). New members were required to study it and be trained in its text, reading it as many as six times. It is from these resonant events that we now examine Pastor Nthenge's teachings and his beliefs; they echo the appraised illustrations of Cults from around the world as chronicled above.

Pastor Paul Nthenge Mackenzie's Cult

Shakahola⁹ forest, the epicentre of Pastor Paul Nthenge Mackenzie's¹⁰ activities, is an 800 acres (320 ha) forest area that is part of Chakama ranch in Kilifi County, in eastern Kenya, (Makong, 2023). Shakahola village is nearby. The nearest large town is Malindi, on Kenya's Indian Ocean coast. Initial signs of a budding Cult began to appear in 2019 when Pastor, Nthenge¹¹ shut down the Good News International Church which he founded in 2003, and invited his followers to move with him to Shakahola, a place he called a new "Holy Land". Pastor Nthenge had been telling his followers for some time that the world was coming to an end. It is worth noting that that Pastor Nthenge began teaching his many followers fear, which is a key ingredient in religion. Religion, at least, when it comes to Christianity and Judaism, is based on the idea of sin: All people are born sinners, impure souls, and if they do not purify themselves, they will soon be condemned to hell by God, where they will have to experience eternal suffering as correctly documented by Rea, Michael C., (2007)¹². In order to avoid being thrown into hell, religion demands that people prove to God that they are worthy of heaven. How? By following the dogma of religion, which Pastor Nthenge continuously taught. As a result, religiously indoctrinated people become neurotic and, in some cases, even psychotic as now evidenced by the Shakahola followers. Initially, he offered Shakahola as a sanctuary from the approaching apocalypse.

⁸ David Koresh (born Vernon Wayne Howell; August 17, 1959 – April 19, 1993) was an American cult leader who played a central role in the Waco siege of 1993. As the head of the Branch Davidians, a religious sect and offshoot of the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, Koresh claimed to be its final prophet. His apocalyptic Biblical teachings, including interpretations of the Book of Revelation and the Seven Seals, attracted various followers to join the cult.

⁹ Shakahola is a Swahili word that loosely translates as "a place where worries are lifted".

¹⁰ A self-proclaimed preacher, he has been described as placing a profound emphasis on end-time doomsday warnings. His message is also anti-Western, and he railed against such "evils of western life" as medical services, education, food, sports, music, and "the uselessness of life". In a song titled "The Antichrist", he denounced the Catholic Church, the United States, and the United Nations as tools of Satan.

¹¹ To appreciate the thinking of this preacher, also read Shaw Daniel, 2013, *the Traumatic Narcissism*.

¹² The author discusses a broad range of social-psychological influence processes: from high pressure sales to cult recruitment.

At Shakahola, he preached the idea that formal education is satanic, and that it is used for purposes of extorting money. Twice between 2017-2018, he was arrested for encouraging children not to go to school as he claimed education was not recognized in the Bible. Pastor Nthenge also condemned education for promoting homosexuality through sex education programmes. "I told people education is evil.... Children are taught gayism and lesbianism," he told the Nation newspaper in 2017. Cialdini (1984), observes that when children are involved in these organizations, it could lead to abuse and injury, as parents are generally too focused on the leader and not paying attention or aware of what happens with their own family. When the actions of the cult affect a child in this manner, he or she may be left scarred for life physically, emotionally or even mentally. He equally taught that doctors serve a different God and encouraged mothers to avoid seeking medical attention during childbirth and not to vaccinate their children as it was not necessary. There are both religious and non-religious cults that use denial of care or persuasion against seeking care as a way to isolate members from the outside world, as observed by Singer, M.T. et al (1995). Cults often teach members that all basic needs, including the need for healthcare, are met by the cult's practices. Alleged paths to healing might include prayer (i.e., faith healing), meditation, extreme diets or mystical rituals. To seek outside help is to betray the cult and reject its belief system (Schein, 1961). In view of the stated problems of the world, much of Pastor Nthenge's preaching consequently related to the fulfilment of Biblical prophecies about Judgement Day. The church's online content also featured posts about the end of the world, impending doom and the supposed dangers of science. The content also featured frequent warnings of an omnipotent satanic force that has supposedly infiltrated the highest echelons of power around the world. He was also highly sceptical of modern technology, previously claiming a plan by the Kenyan government to establish a unique identity number for citizens to access government services was the 'mark of the beast'. With such closely related cultic experiences, Pastor Nthenge convincingly taught that starving themselves to death would lead to meet Jesus faster than any other way, hence, peddling his cultic practice as the ultimate religious solution. "Nthenge brainwashed his converts using William Branham's¹³ End of Days Theology, and convinced them that starvation could hasten their escape from this life to be with Jesus," opined Stein, (2017). How do Pastor Paul Nthenge Mackenzie's cultic views mirror select Karl Heinrich Marx perspectives on religion?

Conceptual Framework: Karl Marx and the Dual Function of Religion

For Karl Marx, religion is inseparable from material conditions. His famous description of religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creature... the opium of the people" captures a dual function: The first of this function is the expression of suffering that members reflect and are thus exposed to the Marx thought line of religion. Religion thus, provides meaning and comfort in contexts of deprivation and inequality. The second function is that of instrument of control. In his argument Marx contends that religion plays the role of pacifying individuals and as such discouraging resistance to unjust conditions.

Deciphering Pastor Paul Nthenge Mackenzie's cult through the Marxist Lense

To understand Marx's critiques of religion and economic theories, it is now important to place at the back of our minds the religious thinking of Cult leaders discussed above such as Pastor Paul Nthenge Mackenzie. According to Marx, religion is an expression of material realities and economic injustice (Marx, Karl; Engels, Friedrich; 1975). Thus, problems in religion are ultimately problems in society¹⁴. Religion is not the disease, but merely a symptom. It is used by oppressors to make people feel better about the distress they experience

¹³ William Marrison Branham (April 6, 1909 – December 24, 1965) was an American Christian minister and faith healer who initiated the post-World War II healing revival, and claimed to be a prophet with the anointing of Elijah, who had come to prelude Christ's second coming; some of his followers have been labelled a "doomsday cult". He is credited as "a principal architect of restorationist thought" for charismatics by some Christian historians, and has been called the "leading individual in the Second Wave of Pentecostalism." He made a lasting influence on televangelism and the modern charismatic movement, and his "stage presence remains a legend unparalleled in the history of the Charismatic movement". At the time they were held, his inter-denominational meetings were the largest religious meetings ever held in some American cities. Branham was the first American deliverance minister to successfully campaign in Europe; his ministry reached global audiences with major campaigns held in North America, Europe, Africa, and India.

¹⁴ We can now deduce that the current problems arising from Pastor Nthenge's religious cult are to greater extent complex problems of the Kenyan society.

due to being poor and exploited¹⁵. This is the origin of his comment that religion is the “opium of the masses”, but as we shall see, his thoughts are much more complex than commonly portrayed. For Marx, economics is what constitutes the base of all of human life and history, a source which generates division of labour, class struggle, and all the social institutions which are supposed to maintain the status quo. Those social institutions are a superstructure built upon the base of economics, totally dependent upon material and economic realities. All of the institutions which are prominent in our daily lives - - marriage, church, government, arts, etc. – can only be truly understood when examined in relation to economic forces¹⁶.

Karl Marx’s Analysis of Religion

According to Marx, religion is one of those social institutions which are dependent upon the material and economic realities in a given society¹⁷. It has no independent history but is instead the creature of productive forces. As Marx wrote, “The religious world is but the reflex of the real world.” As interesting and insightful as Marx’s analysis and critiques are, they are not without their problems, historical and economic. Because of these problems, it would not be appropriate to accept Marx’s ideas uncritically.

Marx’s opinion was that religion is an illusion that provides reasons and excuses to keep society functioning as it should. Much as capitalism takes our productive labour and alienates us from its value, religion takes our highest ideals and aspirations and alienates us from them, projecting them onto an alien and unknowable being called a God¹⁸.

Marx has three fundamental reasons for disliking religion;

First, it is irrational¹⁹; religion is a delusion and worship of appearances that avoids recognizing underlying reality.

Second, religion negates all that is dignified²⁰ in a human being by rendering them servile and more amenable to accepting the status quo. In the preface to his doctoral dissertation, Marx adopted as his motto the words of the Greek hero Prometheus who defied the gods to bring fire to humanity: “I hate all gods,” he averred, with the addition that they “do not recognize man’s self-consciousness as the highest divinity.”

Third, religion is hypocritical²¹. Although it might profess valuable principles, it sides with the oppressors. Jesus advocated helping the poor, but the Christian church merged with the oppressive Roman state, taking

¹⁵ Many of the people linked to Pastor Nthenge’s religious Cult are ordinary Kenyans, the poor.

¹⁶ Read also, McKinnon, Andrew M. (2005). "Reading 'Opium of the People': Expression, Protest and the Dialectics of Religion". *Critical Sociology*. 31 (1–2): 15–38. doi:10.1163/1569163053084360. hdl:2164/3074. S2CID 143119316.

¹⁷ See the above note.

¹⁸ Meeting this God required them to fast. Nthenge told his followers "the fast would count only if they gathered together, he offered them the expansive Shakahola land as a fasting venue. They were not to mingle with anyone from the 'outside' world if they wanted to go to heaven. He instructed them and to destroy all legal documents issued to them by the government, including national IDs and birth as well as other school certificates. On 26 May 2023, Interior Cabinet Secretary Kithure Kindiki declared that Nthenge hired criminals armed with crude weapons to kill any followers who changed their minds about fasting and wanted out, as well as those who took too long to die as a result of fasting.

¹⁹ Religion encourages fasting which on the face of it is irrational. Denying self of food and drink for the sake of religion does not make any sense.

²⁰ The over 200 hundred people who died and buried in Shakahola did not die in dignity. They were famished to death while some were struggled and beaten to death for disobeying the fasting orders, this is a significant level of indignity.

²¹ While forcing others to fast, Pastor Nthenge and his cronies had an elaborate menu of their meals, displaying hypocrisy. He ate and slept very well while others died of starvation. A detailed menu was found pinned at the door of Nthenge’s homestead sheds light on his eating routine, which starkly contrasts the deprivation he advocated for his followers. According to the menu, Nthenge would have a hearty breakfast and skip supper only twice a week. On Mondays, he would consume bread and vegetables for breakfast and forgo supper altogether. Tuesdays saw him having ugali (a cornmeal dish) and vegetables for breakfast, followed by porridge for supper. Wednesdays consisted of breakfast with spaghetti and supper with porridge. Nthenge would have muthokoi (maize meal) for breakfast on Thursdays, again followed by porridge for supper. Fridays involved having ugali and vegetables for breakfast, with supper omitted. Saturdays brought tea and chapati for breakfast, and once again, porridge for supper. Sundays

part in the enslavement of people for centuries. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church preached about heaven but acquired as much property and power as possible. Martin Luther preached the ability of each individual to interpret the Bible but sided with aristocratic rulers and against peasants who fought against economic and social oppression. According to Marx, this new form of Christianity, Protestantism, was a production of new economic forces as early capitalism developed. New economic realities required a new religious superstructure by which it could be justified and defended.

The Heart of a Heartless World

Marx's most famous statement about religion comes from a critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people²². The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions. This is often misunderstood, perhaps because the full passage is rarely used: the boldface in the above show what is usually quoted. The italics are in the original. In some ways, the quote is presented dishonestly because saying "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature..." leaves out that it is also the "heart of a heartless world." This is more a critique of society that has become heartless and is even a partial validation of religion that it tries to become its heart. In spite of his obvious dislike of and anger towards religion, Marx did not make religion the primary enemy of workers and communists. Had Marx regarded religion as a more serious enemy, he would have devoted more time to it.

Marx is saying that religion is meant to create illusory fantasies for the poor, Marx, Karl. [1843] 1970. Economic realities prevent them from finding true happiness in this life, so religion tells them this is OK because they will find true happiness in the next life. Marx is not entirely without sympathy: people are in distress and religion does provide solace, just as people who are physically injured receive relief from opiate-based drugs. The problem is that opiates fail to fix a physical injury—you only forget your pain and suffering for a while. This can be fine, but only if you are also trying to solve the underlying causes of the pain. Similarly, we can sum up that religion does not fix the underlying causes of people's pain and suffering—instead, it helps them forget why they are suffering and causes them to look forward to an imaginary future when the pain ceases instead of working to change circumstances now. Even worse, this "drug" is being administered by the oppressors such as Paul Nthenge Mackenzie who are responsible for the pain and suffering.

Rather than dismissing religion as mere illusion, Marx recognized its emotional and social significance. However, he argued that it ultimately diverts attention from addressing structural causes of suffering. Applied analytically, this framework allows us to interpret religious extremism not simply as irrationality, but as embedded in socio-economic realities. These are the realities that Pastor Paul Nthenge Mackenzies takes advantage of the Shakahola community.

The Shakahola Case in Context and its Application

In contextualizing this movement as practiced and as led by Paul Nthenge Mackenzie in the Shakahola Forest involved, one must understand that there was both physical and social isolation of followers. By and large there was total rejection of formal education, healthcare, and state institutions. Apocalyptic teachings centered on salvation through extreme fasting. While these features align with established definitions of cultic groups, a purely descriptive classification is insufficient. The critical question is why such teachings gained traction.

included breakfast with rice and vegetables, and he would conclude his day with porridge for supper. Evidence outside Mackenzie's house revealed remnants of chicken feathers, indicating that he occasionally consumed chicken, while goat bones were also visible on the premises. While starvation appears to be the main cause of death, some of the victims, including children, were strangled, beaten or suffocated, according to chief government pathologist Johansen Oduor. This epitomised hypocrisy.

²² Read also, McKinnon, Andrew M. (2005). "Reading 'Opium of the People': Expression, Protest and the Dialectics of Religion". *Critical Sociology*. 31 (1–2): 15–38. doi:10.1163/1569163053084360. hdl:2164/3074. S2CID 143119316.

Evidence suggests that followers were drawn from contexts marked by economic hardship, social insecurity, and distrust of institutions. In this sense, the movement can be interpreted as a response to lived distress precisely the condition Marx identified as fertile ground for religious adherence.

Religion as Both Relief and Control

The Shakahola case illustrates Marx's framework in two interconnected ways:

Religion as a Response to Distress

Mackenzie's message offered certainty in uncertain socio-economic conditions. In this case offering the future as a place of comfort and bliss become the consolation for the congregation. The second response that is seen in Shakahola cult is the promise offered by Pastor Mackenzie, of salvation and transcendence. In it, Pastor Mackenzie explains that all these "good" things members have seen and heard about life from a distance shall form their inheritance in the life to come. Thus, apocalyptic dream of members had to be hastened. The final response seems a moral explanation for suffering that the Shakahola cult offers to the adherents. This therefore, aligns with Marx's claim that religion provides psychological relief in a "heartless world."

Religion as a Mechanism of Control

If religion be looked at as a mechanism of control, then the question of instrumentalization is brought in focus. Here, followers were discouraged from questioning authority. We see the police and government instruments not being used and the authority of Paul Nzenge Mackenzie as the cult leader not being questioned. External institutions (education, medicine, government) were delegitimized. Not to mention international institutions as well. Extreme practices (starvation) were framed as spiritual necessity for any legitimate member and in particular for one to gain separation from this body of suffering and hardship. Here, religion shifts from consolation to domination, reinforcing Marx's concern that it can sustain oppressive dynamics rather than challenge them.

Cult Dynamics as Mechanisms- Counterarguments and Limitations

Rather than cataloguing multiple historical examples, it is more analytically useful to note that the Shakahola movement shares core features with groups such as those led by Jim Jones. These include, charismatic authority, isolation from wider society and apocalyptic urgency. However, the key distinction in this paper is that these features are not treated as isolated psychological phenomena. Instead, they are understood as mechanisms through which broader socio-economic and ideological forces operate, reinforcing the Marxist interpretation.

A strictly Marxist reading risks reductionism. Scholars have shown that religion can also provide social support networks, encourage moral responsibility and community cohesion and inspire resistance against injustice. In the Kenyan context, many religious institutions contribute positively to education, healthcare, and social welfare. Therefore, the Shakahola tragedy should not be taken as representative of religion as a whole. Additionally, not all followers can be explained solely through economic vulnerability; factors such as personal belief, identity, and agency also play important roles.

CONCLUSIONS

Religion is uniquely powerful in the way that it creates meaning, motivates, and helps believers to cope with traumatic events. It is also a facilitator of social support. It is important to account for the aspect of religion that distinguishes it from other human processes as well as religious beliefs, Ellwood, R. S. et al (2007). This power may be used by questionable pastors such as Paul Nthenge Mackenzie at to make people feel better

about the distress, they experience due to being poor²³ and exploited. The result of this exploitation is ultimately death as was witnessed in Kenya recently. Should governments regulate religion to avoid a repeat of Shakahola? Religion and government are like a couple who sometimes have a hard time living together but who find they simply cannot live apart. Religion and government both need their independence in order to flourish, but history has shown that a complete divorce is healthy for neither. They travel different but parallel tracks. They are most successful and most effective when they protect and encourage one another. Governments play an essential role in protecting and maintaining religious freedom and in fostering the role of churches in society. Consequently, religious leaders must be adequately grounded in solid theology and belief to avoid leading their flock astray. We are invited to conclude that in view of the power of religion incontestable at Shakahola, we contend with Karl Marx's description of religion: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people," McKinnon, Andrew M. (2005) as far as it gives them an alternative remedy, however steeped in hope, that one day their misery will be solved. Indeed, the same religion encourages adherents to surrender to the supernatural all those troubles which are beyond their ability to solve. Aware of this, the likes of Pastor Nthenge seize the opportunity, filling in the vacuum left by whoever is supposed to solve the problem – whether government institutions or otherwise. Understanding this dual character is essential for both scholarship and policy. Rather than framing the issue solely as "cult behavior," a more comprehensive approach must address the socio-economic conditions that make individuals vulnerable to such movements. Future research should incorporate empirical fieldwork and interdisciplinary perspectives to deepen analysis beyond theoretical interpretation.

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²³ Here, read also, Rogers, M., and M. E. Konieczny. 2018. "Does religion always help the poor? Variations in religion and social class in the west and societies in the global south." *Palgrave Communications* 4(73). doi:10.1057/s41599-018-0135-3