

Freedom of Religion and Beliefs in View of the Shakahola Tragedy in Kenya: Biblical and Theological Analysis

Theophile Hirwe Zikama

Theological Studies Department

Africa International University

Nairobi, Kenya

theophilezikama01@gmail.com

Abstract

The Republic of Kenya has a long tradition of religious diversity and tolerance which has been perceived as a unifying factor that connects people to their communities, creating a sense of identity, belonging and instilling moral values. However, the Shakahola tragedy which occurred in 2023 resulted in mass deaths, with approximately 429 bodies recovered, revealing consequences of manipulation of believers and religious intolerance. This serves as a reminder of the dangers that can be introduced by false teachings and the influence of some religious leaders, emphasizing the necessity for strong frameworks that protect individuals from engaging in harmful religious practices. Historically, religion has been and remains a powerful community mechanism which shapes moral behavior, defines societal norms, and serves as a unifying force within society. This role is increasingly influenced by radicalism, false teachings, intolerance, manipulation, and extremism, particularly when faith is distorted from its fundamental principles or instrumentalized for destructive purposes. For this, fundamental questions arise concerning

the compatibility between religious freedom, extremist practices, and biblical and theological principles. It is from this perspective through qualitative and library research that this paper addresses a crucial question concerning fundamental rights, and more specifically, freedom of religion in view of the Shakahola tragedy in Kenya. In conclusion, while religious freedom is a fundamental right, it must be exercised in respect for human dignity, in accordance to biblical and theological teachings that calls for justice, love and peace. To guarantee an authentic expression of faith that respects the dignity of believers and contributes to social peace in Kenya, this study emphasizes an integrated approach combining laws, ethical responsibility, and biblical and theological principles.

Key Words: Freedom of religion and beliefs, religious extremism, radicalism, false teachings, indoctrination, sect, human rights.

Introduction

Despite the long and proud history of religious diversity and tolerance in the Republic of Kenya (Haynes, 2013, p. 11), the Shakahola tragedy which occurred in 2023 appears as a deviation and misuse of the freedom of religion and beliefs. Approximately 429 bodies were recovered in Shakahola forest in April 2023, a place located in Kilifi County near the coastal town of Malindi on the Indian Ocean, Eastern part of Kenya (Haki, 2024, p. 34). It revealed dramatic consequences of manipulation of believers and religious intolerance (Dahiru, 2025). The "Shakahola tragedy" refers to a religious sect led by Paul Mathenge Mackenzie, head of the Good News International Church, which encouraged its followers to fast until death in order to meet Jesus (Haki, 2024, p. 34).

The Shakahola tragedy sent shock waves through the religious community in Kenya. In this view, fundamental questions arise concerning the compatibility between religious freedom, religious extremism or practices, and biblical and theological principles. It emphasizes the necessity to reflect on how faith can be authentically practiced in respect for human dignity while ensuring that religious freedom is compatible with biblical and theological principles. The study seeks to illuminate how these principles can serve as guides for religious freedom that respects human dignity.

The central question of this paper is to know: *How can a biblical and theological analysis of the Shakahola tragedy in Kenya deepen our understanding of freedom of religion and beliefs in addressing false beliefs and ensuring protection of people's right to practice their faith safely?*

To answer this question, two points are analyzed: The first point presents the literature review on the freedom of religion and beliefs, and the second focuses on Shakahola tragedy: its biblical and theological implications for freedom of religion and the fight against extremism in Kenya.

Literature Review on the Freedom of Religion and Beliefs

Background of the Shakahola Tragedy in Kenya

The "Shakahola tragedy" deeply affected the Kenyan population due to the large number of victims, including children, who lost their lives because of that sect. A report published in 2023 by the Senate subcommittee appointed by the Kenyan Parliament to investigate the tragedy, shows that approximately 613 people are still missing (Haki, 2024, pp. 34–36). It is important to note that spiritual abuse within Kenyan movements follows identifiable patterns of control: the

establishment of absolute authority, control of information, financial exploitation, social isolation, and psychological manipulation. Financial exploitation represents a central component of spiritual abuse. The prosperity gospel creates conditions where "significant donations and offerings are demanded from the unemployed or those on minimum wage, with refusal to give being perceived as a lack of faith."(Wafula, 2025, p. 1516). Information control perpetuates these abusive systems. In the Shakahola tragedy, the person responsible for this incident had incited his followers to "resign, drop out of school, stop eating 'worldly food,' and refuse hospital treatment when sick," while demanding the destruction of all government documents. All these elements are aspects of religious extremism and manipulation of beliefs. Psychological manipulation includes constant indoctrination into a groupthink mentality, leading members to prioritize the goals of the institutional church over their personal objectives and creating an excessive dependence on leaders (Wafula, 2025, p. 1517). From a theological perspective, these various types of manipulation must not go unanswered; they must be discouraged to prevent further victims. Religious extremism, frequently invoking a divine mandate, can lead to serious consequences, including death, as is the case with the Shakahola tragedy (Sikuku et al., 2023, p. 610).

The Role of Law in Protecting Freedom of Religion and Beliefs

Around the world, the virtues of religious diversity are being challenged due to the multiplication of groups that manipulate beliefs and promote violent extremist ideologies. The exploitation of religious teachings for radical purposes that transcend national and cultural boundaries continues to attract international attention because of its potential to disrupt social harmony, security, and fundamental principles (Haynes, 2013). The two most famous

declarations concerning religious freedom are: “Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.” (Diop & Oliveira, n.d., p. 10). The UDHR states in Article 18 that:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

The Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states the following:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief of one's choice, and freedom, individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, rites, practices and teaching.” (Grim, 2011, p. 26).

Indeed, no one shall be subjected to any constraints which impair their freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief of their choice. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subjected only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others (OHCHR).

Additionally, "Freedom of Religion" is protected in the Bill of Rights of the 2010 Kenyan Constitution (The Constitution of Kenya, 2010). Chapter Four of the Constitution of Kenya, in Article 32, entitled “Freedom of Conscience, Religion, Belief, and Opinion”, stipulates the following:

-“Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief, and opinion.”

- “Everyone has the right, individually or collectively, in public or in private, to manifest their religion or beliefs in worship, religious practice, teaching, or observance, including the observance of a day of worship”.

It is important to emphasize that the freedom of religion and expression of conscience, guaranteed in the Republic of Kenya, comes with specific challenges. In fact, the most striking case is the Shakahola tragedy that occurred in April 2023. This incident led to the creation of an ad hoc Senate working group to investigate the matter, and a report from this committee, published in 2023, examined the proliferation of religious organizations and the circumstances of the deaths that occurred in Shakahola forest, Kilifi County. The findings of the commission highlighted the alarming rise of religious extremism in Kenya, and this beyond the specific case of Shakahola. Consequently, several legislative measures were proposed to better regulate religious organizations in Kenya. These measures included developing a framework governing the registration, operation, and governance of religious groups, as well as auditing existing legal and registration systems. Most importantly, the report recommended the implementation of measures to prevent extremist indoctrination, radicalization, and spiritual or financial exploitation by religious groups. Indeed, they suggested the drafting of new legislation specifically focused on regulating religious activities in Kenya in order to ensure responsible and ethical conduct of these organizations in the future (Senate, 2023). In view of Shakahola tragedy, establishing a clear legal framework in Kenya is a necessity to serve as a shield to preserve the diversity of religious extremism, manipulative beliefs and above all to guarantee the protection of freedom of religion and belief in accordance with the scriptures.

Biblical and Theological Teachings about Freedom of Religion and Beliefs

Religious freedom, as it is currently understood, is a condition in which individuals or groups are permitted, without restriction, to adhere to religious beliefs and identity and, within certain limits, to express them and act accordingly in civil and political life, without constraint or sanctions imposed by third parties, including the State (David, 2024, p. 5). As Christian believers, it is essential to understand the theological foundations of this right in order to defend religious freedom for people. In fact, Christian faith has a long and complex history concerning religious freedom. While Christian institutions have sometimes contributed to restricting religious freedoms, Christian theology has also played a crucial role in defending human rights and justice ('Christian Theology and FORB', 2025, p. 2). Properly defined, religious freedom is the liberty to profess the religious beliefs of one's choice and to live in accordance with them. The Bible defends a broad conception of religious freedom, and this is manifested in the Bible's use of persuasion, not coercion, to bring disciples to Christ. Furthermore, the Bible presents faith as a spiritual reality that cannot be imposed on others if it is to be authentic. This is why the Bible envisions a society where religious freedom is respected and where everyone makes their own choices regarding religion. This does not imply relativism, but rather recognizes that no one can force a person to believe against their will (Closson, 2019, p. 5).

Indeed, the biblical and theological teachings support religious freedom by emphasizing that faith is a free choice, not a constraint, rooted in human dignity (*Imago Dei*), conscience, and God's call to a voluntary response. They draw upon Jesus' message of freedom, the parable of the weeds (Matthew 13), and Paul's teachings on Christian liberty. Modern theology affirms religious freedom as a fundamental human right linked to conscience, while acknowledging the limitations of society (Closson, n.d., p. 7).

The Genesis account of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden rests on a fundamental human capacity: the power and freedom to choose. Freedom of choice is a core biblical principle, even when options seem limited. The “Eden principle” reappears throughout the testimony of Scripture. Joshua asks the people to choose between God and other gods (Joshua 24:15), and Elijah presents a crucial choice between the Lord and the gods of Baal (1 Kings 18:16–39) (‘New International Version (NIV)). This principle continues in the New Testament as a two-way proposition. Christians are chosen, but they can equally choose to follow Jesus or turn away from him (John 6:66-70; 13:18; Luke 18:28). Jesus loved a rich man who refused to follow him (Mark 10:17-31), and Paul lamented that Demas had abandoned the faith (2 Timothy 4:10). The Bible clearly refers to the freedom to choose, practice, or change one's religion or belief, and offers a clear vision of the right choice (Philpot-Nissen, n.d., p. 11). Indeed, from Eden to Demas, the message remains constant: everyone must be free to choose, even if that choice distances them from communion with God.

It should be added that in the biblical tradition, freedom of belief and religion is implicitly present from the Old Testament onward and is explicitly affirmed in the New Testament, where respect for individual conscience is valued. For instance, in the book of John 8:32, it says, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,” emphasizing the importance of personal truth and freedom of conscience as fundamental elements of authentic faith.

Biblical and Theological implications for religious freedom and the fight against extremism in Kenya

The Shakahola tragedy is an alarming example of extremist deviations in biblical interpretation, raising fundamental questions about how faith can be misused to justify extreme acts such as violence and mass suicide. For Christians, it is crucial to take a step back from these events to understand the biblical and theological issues involved, in order to prevent such horrors from recurring in Kenya or elsewhere, while also affirming the need for a critical and responsible approach to understand and discern the Scriptures. This tragedy raises one of the major issues: the misinterpretation of biblical texts by the sect leader. It raises the question of the use of Biblical texts in indoctrination and the responsibility this entails for religious leaders, especially when they manipulate the scriptures for purposes of exploitation or control. The Bible, as a divinely inspired book, must be interpreted with care, according to its historical, cultural, and hermeneutical context. An honest and responsible reading seeks to reveal its multiple meanings, while avoiding any interpretation that might encourage violence or blind submission. Shakahola tragedy raises the problem of the theology of faith and its distortion. However, an authentic Christian faith emphasizes love, justice, mercy, and respect for human life and dignity.

In the Shakahola sect, these fundamental values were obscured in favor of a theology of fear, submission, and indoctrination that valorises death as a necessary step to encountering Jesus. This constitutes a grave theological error, for the Bible does not advocate death as the ultimate end, but the abundant life that Christ came, according to the book of John 10:10, “so that people might live life, and have it to the full.” Psychological manipulation and the implementation of indoctrination that incites self-harm or suicide have no basis in the authentic Christian faith, which should instead lead to life, freedom, peace and hope.

The essential biblical issue is that of scriptural authority. The Bible must guide the life of the believer, but this authority must be framed by a sound, reflective, and contextualized reading. The misuse of texts to legitimize suicidal or murderous acts underscores the importance of balanced biblical teaching, preached in love and truth, to prevent any extremist exploitation. The Christian faith is not a tool for manipulation or exerting psychological or social domination, but a message of redemption. Shakahola tragedy calls for theological reflection on the responsibility of the Church and spiritual leaders in the face of sectarian abuses.

Furthermore, new mechanisms and strategies must be adopted by the government and religious leaders to prevent this kind of manipulation and spiritual extremism from occurring again in the Republic of Kenya. Manipulation, exploitation, and indoctrination must be denounced, for they alter the true mission of the Church, which is to proclaim the Gospel of peace, justice, and goodness according to the book of Matthew 28:19-20.

Theological Outline on the Prevention of Religious Manipulation and the Protection of Human Life

Reflecting theologically on freedom of religion, it is essential to recognize that true faith should promote life, dignity, and love, aligning with Jesus' teachings (John 10:10: The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.). The Shakahola tragedy reveals the extreme importance of a balanced and responsible interpretation of biblical texts. For that, our Christian faith, when lived in love, peace, and respect, possesses a transformative power able of disarming intolerance and extremism. However, it is essential that religious and community leaders commit to a clear, contextual, peaceful reading and good interpretation of the Bible to avoid any ideological manipulation and

religious extremism. Community engagement based on true teachings can contribute to promote harmonious coexistence. Faith must not be a tool of manipulation, exclusion, or violence, but rather a vehicle for reconciliation, peace, mutual understanding, and solidarity. The Bible emphasizes the importance of freedom of religion and belief, highlighting the need for individuals to choose their faith without coercion (Galatians 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery"). This verse is a call to believers to stand in the liberty provided by Christ and not be entangled again by the bondage of the law or other rules for salvation, which is presented as a heavy yoke of slavery. It encourages Christians to live in the freedom Christ provides through faith, rather than trying to be justified by adhering to a legalistic system.). This verse is part of a larger argument in Galatians where Paul confronts false teachers who were telling new Christians they needed to be circumcised and follow the law to be truly saved.

From a theological perspective, it should be emphasized that a responsible and contextualized reading and interpretation of Scripture should be encouraged, in order to avoid any religious extremism and manipulation of beliefs. Above all, the Church's responsibility is to guide its members toward a clear-sighted, balanced faith rooted in Gospel truth, in order to counter all forms of manipulation or exploitation. It is necessary to develop a pastoral ethic, so that the Scriptures remains luminous and life-giving, always in harmony with human dignity.

Recommendations and Practical Solutions for Freedom of Beliefs and the Fight against Religious Extremism in Kenya

To promote religious freedom while combating religious extremism in Kenya, three elements are central to all the points discussed previously.

Promote Education and Awareness

From the results of this research paper, it is clear that the perpetrators of the Shakahola tragedy in Kenya spread disinformation and extremist ideologies among their followers. Therefore, church leaders should promote education and awareness campaigns to counter this disinformation and this religious extremism and ideologies propagated by some of their groups. Awareness campaigns must emphasize the risks associated with manipulation, misinterpretation of biblical texts, and indoctrination by poorly trained or malicious religious leaders. It is imperative that educational institutions, whether academic or religious, be regulated and monitored to ensure that their teachings comply with Kenyan national standards.

Encourage regularly interfaith dialogue in Kenya

Encourage open and respectful exchanges between different religious communities to foster mutual understanding and uphold human dignity. Such dialogue can serve as a vital tool in preventing religious extremism, promoting peaceful coexistence, and ensuring that beliefs align with biblical and theological principals. This involves creating platforms where religious representatives, community or church leaders, and believers can exchange views on their beliefs, share their experiences, and dispel misunderstandings related to doctrines and practices.

Establish new legislative standards and measures in Kenya

The Kenyan legal framework must be strengthened to better protect religious freedom and beliefs while preventing abuses. The government, in collaboration with parliamentary and judicial institutions, must review and supplement existing laws relating to religion to address the gaps that have become apparent in light of the Shakahola tragedy. This includes clearly defining

prohibited or dangerous practices, penalizing those who exploit faith for manipulation or exploitation, and establishing mechanisms for monitoring and overseeing religious movements in Kenya. Above all, the rigorous application of these laws would prevent groups or individuals from abusing their position to promote extremist ideologies or endanger the lives of the faithful. As the Shakahola tragedy illustrates, recognizing spiritual abuses is essential for effective action and transparency must become the norm, and any violation of standards must result in exemplary sanctions.

Conclusion

The Shakahola tragedy in Kenya highlights a crucial importance of reconciling religious freedom with a profound biblical and theological understanding to prevent such calamities. This paper argues that while religious freedom is a fundamental right, it must be exercised with respect for human dignity, in accordance to teachings that call for love, peace and justice. Biblical and theological analysis reveals that the manipulation of faith for extremist ends constitutes a distortion of authentic spiritual principles and can lead to disastrous consequences. Therefore, it is imperative to strengthen the ethical and spiritual dimension of religious practice, promote education and awareness, encourage interfaith dialogue in Kenya, and establish strong legal frameworks to protect believers from religious manipulation, extremism, intolerance and indoctrination. In short, an integrated approach, combining laws, biblical, theological principles, and ethical responsibility, is essential to guarantee an authentic expression of faith that respects the dignity of every individual and contributes to social peace. Religion can be a source of hope and inspiration for many, but also a source of danger and destruction if misused or abused. Religious freedom is an absolute right protected by the Kenya Constitution and others

international legal texts and should never be restricted by secondary laws; however, it does entail a certain responsibility.

References

141205RFPChristianityReligiousFreedomSourcebookScripturalTheologicalLegalTexts.pdf.

(n.d.). Retrieved December 18, 2025, from <https://s3.amazonaws.com/berkley-center/141205RFPChristianityReligiousFreedomSourcebookScripturalTheologicalLegalTexts.pdf>

Christian theology and FORB – Welcome to the Fabo Learning Community. (n.d.).

<https://home.fabo.org/christian-theology-forb/>

Closson, D. (n.d.). *Biblical Principles for Religious Liberty: Evidence from Scripture and Church History*.

Dahiru, A. (2025, April 29). From Shakahola to Migori: Kenya's Struggle with Deadly Religious Cults. *HumAngle*. <https://humanglemedia.com/from-shakahola-to-migori-kenyas-struggle-with-deadly-religious-cults/>

Diop, G., & Oliveira, L. I. (n.d.). *Copyright ©, 2022 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*.

Haki, U. (2024). *Kenya's spiritual president and the making of a born-again republic: William-Ruto, Kenya's Evangelicals and religious mobilizations*. Ifri.

Haynes, J. (2013). Religion, conflict and peace. *Peacebuilding*, 1(1), 159–164.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2013.756283>

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. (n.d.). OHCHR. Retrieved December 18, 2025, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

New International Version (NIV)—Version Information—BibleGateway.com. (n.d.). Retrieved December 18, 2025, from <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/>

Philpot-Nissen, J. (n.d.). *FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF A guide to biblical insights*.

Senate, T. (2023). *Report of the AD-HOC Committee to Investigate the Proliferation of Religious Organizations and Circumstances Leading to More than 95 Deaths in Shakahola, Kilifi County*. <http://196.202.208.105:80/xmlui/handle/123456789/23566>

Sikuku, I. W., Ekwenye, J., & Mabele, E. N. (n.d.). *Gender and Death in the Name of God: The Shakahola Massacre in Kilifi Kenya, 2023*.

The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century (Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics): Grim, Brian J., Finke, Roger: 9780521146838: *Amazon.com: Books*. (n.d.). Retrieved December 18, 2025, from <https://www.amazon.com/Price-Freedom-Denied-Persecution-Twenty-First/dp/0521146836>

Universal Declaration of Human Rights | United Nations. (n.d.). Retrieved December 18, 2025, from <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

Wafula, L. J. (2025). *Spiritual Abuse and Authoritarian Control in Modern Kenyan Church Movements*. 9(1).