

## **“MBONA HUENDANGI KANISA?” HINTS AND NUANCES OF GROWING SECULARIZATION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN RŪAKA, KĪAMBU COUNTY**

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**November 2025**

### **ABSTRACT**

**Statement of the problem:** The question "Mbona huendangi kanisa?" (Kiswahili for "Why don't you go to church?"), reflects a general concern about the noticeable decline in church attendance among young adults in Kenya, particularly in the rapidly urbanizing town of Rūaka. Many youth aged 18–35 are no longer prioritizing traditional church attendance and participation, instead choosing leisure activities or digital spiritual content. This decline signals a significant shift in religious practice and understanding, raising questions about the future role of institutional religion in urban Kenyan society.

**Method/Methodology:** Using qualitative methods—semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and literature review—the study thematically analyzes emerging patterns of religious disengagement and reinterpretation, applying Peter Berger's secularization theory tailored to Kenya's urban setting.

**Results of the Study:** Findings show young adults are not abandoning spirituality but are reshaping religious identities outside traditional institutions. Busy lifestyles, disillusionment with church leadership, and openness to pluralistic, individualized spirituality contribute to vibrant, culturally embedded spiritual expression despite declining institutional attendance.

**Conclusion:** The study reveals a complex shift in religious engagement among Rūaka's youth, where declining church participation coincides with the rise of personalized and hybrid spiritualities. Influenced by moral autonomy, digital media, and dissatisfaction with institutions, young adults are redefining faith through a blend of Christian and alternative practices, framed by secularization theory and Ubuntu philosophy.

**Recommendations:** Religious institutions should adopt inclusive, dialogical approaches that honor community values like Ubuntu and leverage digital platforms. Prioritizing authentic relationships and responsiveness to social realities is key to relevance. Policymakers and religious leaders must support youth-focused programs integrating spirituality with cultural identity and contemporary challenges, fostering meaningful faith exploration.

**Keywords:** *Church, Rūaka, Spirituality, Secularization, Urban, Young Adults.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Lazar (1998) explains that secularization, rooted in the Latin word *saeculum* meaning "of this world" or "non-spiritual," has evolved to reflect changing societal values. In modern usage, especially since 19th-century industrial Europe, secularism has come to emphasize the improvement of material conditions, scientific progress, and national development. However, Lazar grounds secularization in a more foundational understanding, describing it as a behavioral pattern shaped by a group's basic attitude toward life and religion. He argues that secularization is not merely about the absence of religion, but rather about the degree to which religious beliefs influence a person's thinking and actions. Specifically, Lazar (1998) notes that "if one's religion is substantive, then secularization is the process in which the way people think and behave is less influenced by religious teaching, symbols and institutions that are based on supernatural values. If one is consistent in one's belief and practice of religion, then one's attitude and relation to other aspects of life will also be greatly influenced by the same." This definition highlights the relational nature of secularization, showing that its meaning depends heavily on how one defines and lives out their religious commitments.

The question "*Mbona huendangi kanisa?*" Kiswahili for Why don't you go to church? is becoming increasingly common among young adults in Kenya, particularly those aged 18 to 35. More than a casual inquiry, it reflects a deeper reckoning with the meaning, relevance, and role of institutional religion in contemporary urban life. For this demographic—navigating the intersecting pressures of modernity, digital culture, and personal autonomy—such questions signal not a wholesale abandonment of faith, but rather a deliberate, ongoing negotiation with inherited religious frameworks. Across cities and towns, young Kenyans are grappling with whether, how, and why to remain connected to traditional religious institutions.

This phenomenon is not isolated. Globally, young adults are at the center of a marked decline in institutional religious affiliation. In Europe and North America, weekly church attendance and formal membership in religious organizations have fallen sharply, with large numbers of youth identifying as spiritual but not religious (Pew Research Center, 2018; Gallup, 2021). While sub-Saharan Africa is often portrayed as uniformly religious, emerging data suggest that urban African youth are also participating in a quiet but growing redefinition of religious life. In countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana, urban youth are increasingly disengaging from institutional religion, while maintaining belief in some form of spirituality (Afro barometer, 2022).

Empirical evidence from various denominations supports this concern. For instance, studies on the Presbyterian Church in Kajiado Presbytery (ARJESS, 2021) and the Methodist Church in Kenya's Nyambene Synod (ResearchGate, 2022) highlight low youth participation in formal church programs, citing alienation and poor engagement strategies. Similarly, ACI Africa (2023) has reported an alarming trend of urban Kenyan youth abandoning Christianity altogether in favor of syncretic or New Age spiritualities that are more attuned to their lifestyles and worldviews.

In this evolving landscape, digital media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and even TikTok have become key spaces for religious expression, virtual worship, and spiritual experimentation (Rest of World, 2024). These platforms offer not only convenience and flexibility but also a refuge from perceived institutional failings. According to recent studies (Editon Online, 2023; AJOEI, 2024), Kenyan youth are not rejecting spirituality per se, but rather reconfiguring it through personal devotionals, influencer-led sermons, and online fellowships. The Episcopal News Service (2024) also documents how Kenyan youth are increasingly holding religious leaders accountable—pushing for transparency, relevance, and justice within and beyond the church walls.

Kenya reflects this continental shift with striking clarity. Although the 2019 National Census indicates that over 85% of Kenyans identify as Christian, evidence from urban congregations and qualitative studies suggests declining in-person attendance among young adults. Nairobi churches, in particular, report dwindling numbers of youth in Sunday services, even as digital religious engagement surges. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become popular alternatives for religious expression—more accessible, flexible, and often perceived as less morally compromised than traditional institutions.

Many young adults who have abandoned church attendance are not rejecting spirituality altogether, but are instead exploring moral frameworks rooted in African traditions and alternative spiritualities (Selvam & Githinji, as cited in Aineah, 2023). According to Selvam and Githinji, weak faith formation, family discord, and disillusionment with church leadership are key factors influencing Nairobi youth to distance themselves from Christianity. Even after leaving formal religious institutions, some continue to engage in moral reflection guided by humanistic and community-based ethics rather than strict doctrinal teachings. Their disengagement is further fueled by perceptions of materialism within churches and dissatisfaction with the Church's handling of social issues such as youth concerns and political violence. The post-election violence of 2007–2008 also played a critical role in eroding young

people's trust in religious communities, particularly where tribal divisions were evident among Christian groups. As a result, many youths now navigate their religious identities outside traditional Christian structures, blending African morality with spiritual curiosity. Complementing these findings, Mutuma and Ogidis (2022) note that the Church in Nairobi is struggling to retain youth engagement in the face of rising postmodern relativism, which challenges absolute truths and traditional religious authority. An increasing number of young people, especially those aged 20–35, now identify as “spiritual but not religious,” distancing themselves from churches they see as exclusive, irrelevant, and disconnected from their lived realities. Secular and social activities are often more appealing to them. In response, Mutuma and Ogidis propose a postmodern public theology rooted in African communitarian values like *Ubuntu*, advocating for a more dialogical, contextually aware, and relational church. They argue that reimagining theology in this inclusive and culturally grounded way is essential for reversing youth disengagement and ensuring the Church remains both relevant and transformative in a rapidly evolving society.

This study focuses on Rūaka, a rapidly urbanizing suburb located 15 kilometers northwest of Nairobi's central business district. Once a peri-urban agricultural zone, Rūaka has transformed into a high-density residential area dominated by high-rise apartments and a growing population of young, middle-income professionals. Its appeal is further enhanced by the proximity to major leisure and recreational hubs such as Two Rivers Mall, Rosslyn Riviera, and Village Market. Additionally, the nearby Westlands area offers a vibrant mix of shopping, dining, and entertainment options, making Rūaka a strategically located and lifestyle-friendly neighborhood. In this context, Sunday worship routines are increasingly being replaced by leisure, personal wellness, online spirituality, or social commitments. Among residents aged 18 to 35, church attendance is no longer a cultural default but a contested choice—one increasingly open to rejection or revision. Despite the presence of several churches in Rūaka—including Mamlaka Hill Chapel Rūaka Campus, Karura Community Chapel (Foresight Campus), ACK Diocese of Mount Kenya South – New Rūaka, Blessed Joseph Allamano Rūaka Catholic Church, KAG Church Rūaka – Oasis of Life, Blessed Hope Church Kenya, and the Africa Evangelical Presbyterian Church—this variety does not necessarily translate into active physical or online attendance by young adults living in the area. While these churches offer diverse worship styles and theological traditions, young adults in Rūaka remain disengaged from regular church participation. Factors such as demanding urban lifestyles, perceived irrelevance of church teachings, rigid institutional structures, and the appeal of secular social

spaces often lead young adults to identify as spiritual but not religious. Consequently, the presence of these churches in Rūaka, though notable, does not reflect a corresponding level of youth involvement in church life.

The central argument of this paper is that the dwindling church attendance and growing disaffiliation from institutional religion among young adults in Rūaka should not be interpreted simply as a decline in faith. Rather, it constitutes a form of localized, generational secularization—subtle, contextually driven, and deeply shaped by urbanization, digital connectivity, and evolving cultural values. The repeated question "*Mbona huendangi kanisa?*" thus serves as a rhetorical and sociological entry point into the complex spiritual negotiations of Kenya's urban youth.

By foregrounding the experiences and perspectives of young adults aged 18 to 35, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how religious disengagement operates in African urban contexts. It challenges the binary of religious vs. secular and argues for a conceptual framework that accounts for spiritual fluidity, institutional critique, and generational transformation. Rūaka, as both a physical and symbolic space, offers a powerful lens through which to explore the shifting religious landscape in 21st-century Kenya.

This inquiry is especially urgent given demographic trends: Kenya's population was projected to reach 50.3 million in 2020 with 17.8 million individuals aged 15–34, and is expected to grow to 63.9 million with 22.3 million in this age group by 2030. These figures underscore the centrality of youth in shaping the nation's socio-cultural and religious future. At the policy level, this demographic weight necessitates greater attention to how institutions—religious and otherwise—engage with young people's evolving identities, critiques, and aspirations. Policymakers should consider developing inclusive, youth-centered strategies that recognize spiritual diversity, respond to institutional disaffection, and foster civic spaces where young adults can explore meaning and belonging beyond traditional religious structures.

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Kenya's strong historical identification with Christianity is well documented, with over 85% of the population affiliating as Christian according to national census data, KNBS (2019). However, patterns of church participation and attendance among urban young adults, particularly those aged 18 to 35, are undergoing notable change. Increasingly, young adults are disengaging from traditional church attendance, raising important questions about the ongoing relevance and influence of institutional religion. The frequently posed question, "*Mbona*

*huendangi kanisa?*” (“Why don’t you go to church?”), encapsulates a broader generational and cultural tension wherein traditional religious expectations confront evolving youth identities and worldviews.

This disengagement is often subtle and gradual, manifesting through nuanced shifts in attitudes and lifestyle choices rather than overt rejection. These hints and nuances of secularization reflect a reconfiguration of spirituality that is less tethered to formal religious institutions. While global scholarship has extensively explored youth secularization in Western contexts, empirical research capturing similar dynamics in African urban environments remains limited. Existing studies on African religiosity often emphasize continued fervent religious expression, overlooking emerging forms of spiritual disaffiliation and individualized faith practices among youth in rapidly urbanizing locales.

Rūaka, a fast-growing urbanized town in Kīambu County near Nairobi, presents a pertinent case study. Characterized by dense residential developments and a burgeoning population of young, middle-income professionals, Rūaka epitomizes the socioeconomic and cultural shifts influencing religious engagement. Despite hosting multiple churches—including Mamlaka Hill Chapel Rūaka Campus, Karura Community Chapel, ACK New Rūaka, and Blessed Joseph Allamano Catholic Church—active participation by young adults remains low in physical attendance. This discrepancy signals a disjunction between institutional religious availability and youth engagement.

This article addresses this gap by investigating the growing secularization among young adults in Rūaka. It explores underlying motivations for church disengagement, alternative spiritual or secular practices adopted, and the broader socio-cultural implications. Through this localized lens, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of secularization processes in contemporary Kenya, challenging dominant narratives of persistent youth religiosity in sub-Saharan Africa and illuminating the complex interplay of urbanization, modernity, and spirituality.

### **Research Objectives**

The overall objective was to investigate the growing secularization among young adults in Rūaka, Kīambu County, by examining their disengagement from traditional church participation and attendance, exploring alternative spiritual or secular practices, and understanding the sociocultural factors influencing these shifts.



1. To examine the factors contributing to the disengagement of young adults from traditional church attendance in Rūaka, Kīambu County.
2. To explore the alternative spiritual or secular practices adopted by young adults in Rūaka amid declining institutional church participation.
3. To analyze the socio-cultural and economic influences shaping the religious attitudes and behaviors of young adults in the urbanizing context of Rūaka.
4. To assess the implications of growing secularization among young adults for the future role and relevance of institutional religion in Rūaka and similar urban settings.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the key factors driving the decline in traditional church attendance among young adults in Rūaka?
2. How are young adults in Rūaka redefining their spirituality or secular identity outside of formal religious institutions?
3. In what ways do socio-cultural and economic changes in Rūaka influence young adults' religious beliefs and practices?
4. What are the potential consequences of growing secularization for the institutional church's engagement with youth in Rūaka and comparable urban areas?

### **3. THEORETICAL REVIEW / FRAMEWORK**

This study is anchored in Peter Berger's secularization theory (1967), which argues that modernization erodes institutional religious authority through the forces of pluralism, rationalization, and individualism. As societies modernize, religious institutions lose their societal dominance, and religion is increasingly relegated to the private sphere. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant to Rūaka, a rapidly urbanizing suburb of Nairobi, where young adults are increasingly disengaging from traditional church participation and attendance despite the visible presence of religious institutions. However, in a later revision of his stance, Berger (1999) acknowledged that secularization is not a linear or universal process. While institutional religion may decline, religious belief and spirituality often persist in privatized or individualized forms. This dual perspective is essential in analyzing the complex religio-cultural shifts occurring among young adults in Rūaka, many of whom continue to identify as spiritual or Christian, even while disengaging from formal church structures.

Complementing Berger's framework, this study draws on several additional theoretical perspectives. Moral Individualism, as described by Smith and Denton (2005), captures the tendency among contemporary youth to prioritize personal moral reasoning over institutional doctrine. Religious commitment becomes a matter of personal authenticity and subjective meaning, rather than institutional loyalty—an approach increasingly observed among young adults in Rūaka. Ubuntu theory further explains this disengagement through a philosophy popularized by Desmond Tutu, which emphasizes community, inclusion, and relational accountability (Tutu, 1999). Many young people perceive churches as disconnected from these values—often prioritizing hierarchy and dogma over genuine human connection. As a result, they are drawn to alternative spaces that better reflect Ubuntu's principles of mutual respect, relevance, and communal belonging. Additionally, the theory of Digital Religion (Campbell, 2012) highlights how digital media enables new forms of religious engagement that are personalized, commoditized, and often detached from institutional settings. In Rūaka, where access to digital platforms is widespread, young adults increasingly turn to online spaces for spiritual content, replacing or supplementing traditional worship practices. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a multifaceted lens for analyzing the hints and nuances of growing secularization among young adults in Rūaka. Rather than viewing secularization solely as a decline in belief, this study conceptualizes it as a transformation in how religion is understood, practiced, and integrated into the lives of youth in a rapidly changing urban Kenyan context.

#### **4. EMPIRICAL REVIEW**

Contemporary research reveals a growing detachment of young adults from traditional religious institutions despite high Christian affiliation in Kenya, particularly in peri-urban areas like Rūaka, where churches struggle to maintain consistent youth attendance (Were, Ngari, & Gitome, 2024). Mutuma and Ogidis (2022) attribute this trend to a "postmodern drift" driven by cultural relativism, media saturation, and neoliberal values, leading youth to favor individualized spirituality over collective religious forms. However, Njoroge's (2014) study of Mavuno Church offers a counterpoint, showing how culturally relevant programming, dynamic worship, and contextualized sermons addressing real-life issues successfully engage young adults. Despite this, many youth experience non-linear faith journeys that such institutional models may not fully accommodate.



Complementing these findings, Dejean (2023) highlights how urban secularism shapes religious practice at the local level, with municipal governance influencing public religious expression and identity politics, as seen in Quebec’s “republican secularism.” This uneven negotiation of secularism parallels Kenya’s urban religious landscape, where dominant Christian norms coexist with growing youth disengagement and syncretic spiritualities. Dejean’s focus on local governance underscores how urban youth’s shifting religiosity in places like Rūaka reflects broader transformations in the cultural management of religion amid complex social and economic challenges.

### **Synthesis and Research Gap**

These comparative studies suggest that secularism is not merely the absence of religion, but a form of regulation, cultural negotiation, and identity assertion, especially in urban contexts. In Nairobi’s Mavuno Church, religious innovation and cultural resonance have helped stem the tide of youth disengagement. In Quebec’s cities, secularism is institutionalized and contested, revealing both exclusionary and pluralist impulses.

Yet, there remains a research gap: how do young adults in non-central, peri-urban nodes like Rūaka perceive and engage with religion today? Does the informality of religious life in such areas foster new forms of hybrid spirituality? Do young people simply ignore institutional religion—or actively resist it? And to what extent do local governance structures (e.g., land use, cultural policy) shape religious visibility or invisibility?

This study sought to understand how local religious landscapes reflect broader shifts in identity, community, and spiritual practice among young adults in transitional urban zones.

## **5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that links youth religious disengagement to broader processes of urbanization, digital media influence, socioeconomic change, and individual identity formation. The framework is informed by sociological theories of secularization and religious individualization, particularly those that emphasize context-specific and generational shifts rather than a linear decline of belief.

At the center of this framework is the young adult (aged 18–35) living in an urban environment—specifically Rūaka—who is navigating competing demands, evolving values, and new forms of social belonging. The framework conceptualizes institutional religious

disengagement not as a complete abandonment of spirituality, but as a reorientation of religious life in response to urban modernity.

**Core Constructs and Relationships**

Urbanization leads to high-density living, increased mobility, and time constraints, which weaken community-based religious routines and reduce the church’s role in daily life. Digital media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok enable virtual church experiences and personalized devotionals, offering flexible spiritual engagement that competes with traditional attendance. Many young people view institutional religion as disconnected, morally compromised, or commercialized, fostering skepticism and selective participation. Youth prioritize authenticity, autonomy, and critical thinking, often embracing individualized spirituality and wellness practices over strict doctrine or institutional loyalty. These factors contribute to declining church attendance and a shift toward private spirituality, virtual worship, or alternative forms of meaning-making.

This conceptual framework positions religious disengagement as a multi-factorial, dynamic process shaped by structural conditions and personal agency. It allows the study to explore not only *what* is happening among young adults in Rūaka, but *why* and *how* their religious lives are being transformed.

**Table 1: Key Constructs and Variables**

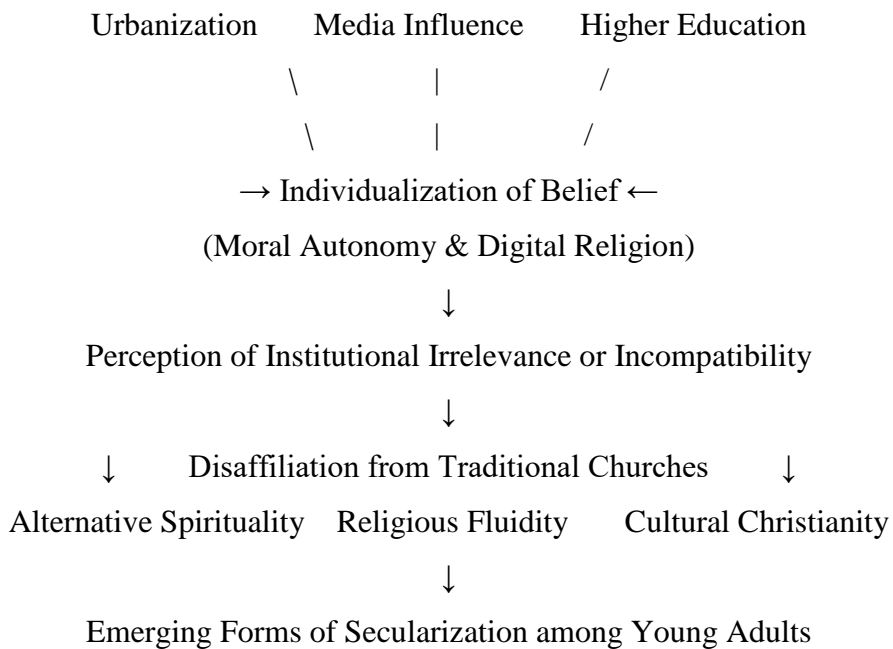
Independent Variables	Mediating Variables	Dependent Variables
Urbanization & socioeconomic transition in Rūaka	- Perceived irrelevance of institutional religion	- Growing secularization among young adults in Rūaka
Exposure to global and digital media	- Rise of moral individualism	- Disaffiliation from organized church
Educational attainment and critical consciousness	- Preference for alternative or digital spirituality	- Shift to privatized or hybrid spirituality
Peer influence and social mobility aspirations	- Fragmented religious identity	

Conceptual Assumptions

The following conceptual assumptions underpin the understanding of youth religious engagement in contemporary urban settings. Modernization and urbanization foster pluralistic environments that revitalize traditional religious narratives. Digital and popular culture provide alternative spiritual and moral perspectives that are more relevant to young adults. Increased moral autonomy and individualism lead to questioning institutional authority and shifting religious identity toward personal meaning-making. In this context, secularization is not about atheism but reflects disaffiliation from institutions and the rise of personalized spirituality.

Visual Representation

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Youth Secularization in Rūaka



Framework Contribution

This framework allows for an interpretive analysis of secularization as a multidimensional, culturally situated, and youth-driven process, shaped not only by institutional decline but by the active renegotiation of belief, community, and identity. It also accommodates both empirical observations—such as those drawn from Mavuno Church studies—and broader theoretical trends from urban secularism literature (Dejean, 2023; Martínez-Ariño, 2021).

## 6. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted in Rūaka, a rapidly urbanizing peri-urban town near Nairobi that has attracted many middle-income professionals and students, making it an ideal site to explore the spiritual lives of young adults aged 18–35. This demographic is known for questioning traditional religious authority and engaging in individualized spiritual practices. Using a qualitative exploratory design, 25 participants with diverse religious and secular orientations were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected from January to April 2025 and included semi-structured interviews, participant observation of local church services and digital platforms, and analysis of supplementary materials such as church bulletins and social media. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, and key themes identified included declining institutional church participation, disillusionment with religious authority, growth of hybrid spiritualities, moral autonomy, and the influence of urban life and digital media on spiritual connectivity. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including informed consent, the use of pseudonyms, participants' right to withdraw at any stage, and sensitivity to potential social stigma related to religious disaffiliation or alternative spiritualities in Kenyan society.

## 7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal multifaceted patterns of religious engagement. Decline in institutional church participation, the rise of individualized and hybrid spiritualities, disillusionment with religious authority and the growing importance of digital media as a new religious space, rise of moral autonomy and ethical subjectivism, and influence of urban lifestyle and digital platforms on belief systems.

### Descriptive Overview and Statistical Summary

While the study was primarily qualitative, basic descriptive statistics revealed key trends among participants:

- 76% (19/25) attended church less than once per month
- 68% (17/25) engaged with religious or spiritual content via digital platforms
- 16% (4/25) practiced alternative spirituality (e.g., meditation, yoga, African religion)
- 12% (3/25) identified as secular or non-religious

A Fisher's Exact Test was conducted to explore the association between church attendance frequency and digital religious engagement. The result ( $p = 1.000$ ) indicated no statistically

significant association, suggesting that reduced in-person attendance does not imply total religious disengagement but reflects shifting modes of religious expression

**Table 2: Key trends among participants**

Category	Sub-category	Number of Participants
Gender	Male	12
	Female	13
Religious Affiliation	Christian (self-identified)	18
	Spiritual but not religious	5
	Non-religious / Atheist	2
Church Attendance	Weekly	3
	Occasionally (holidays/events)	8
	Rarely/Never	14
Alternative Practices	Meditation / Yoga	7
	African religion or spiritual blending	4
	Online-only religious participation	9

## Discussion of key themes

### Declining Institutional Participation

Interviews with 25 young adults in Rūaka revealed a marked decline in regular church attendance. Only 3 participants (12%) reported attending church weekly, while the remaining 22 (88%) described their attendance as irregular, rare, or nonexistent. Despite low physical attendance, a significant 88% engaged with religious content online through platforms such as YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

To explore the relationship between church attendance and online engagement, a Fisher's Exact Test compared the proportions of digital religious engagement among regular versus irregular churchgoers. The result showed no statistically significant association ( $p = 1.0$ ), indicating that online religious engagement does not predict church attendance frequency.

The findings indicate a shift toward individualized spirituality among young adults in Rūaka, with many turning to digital platforms for flexible and relevant spiritual engagement. This trend reflects dissatisfaction with institutional churches, often perceived as commercialized or disconnected from real-life concerns. As one participant put it, "These days, church feels more

like a business than a place of worship,” underscoring why a significant number prefer online or personal spiritual practices over traditional attendance.

This reflects a transformation rather than disappearance of religion in Rūaka, supporting Berger’s (1999) thesis that modernization restructures, rather than erases, religiosity.

### **Patterns and Drivers of Declining Institutional Participation**

Participants described attending church “sporadically,” “only during holidays,” or “when pressured by family.” Key deterrents included:

- Long working hours and fatigue (68%)
- Disillusionment with church leadership due to perceived hypocrisy (64%)
- Perceived irrelevance of sermons to modern youth life (52%)

Several expressed frustration over the commercialization of religion. Despite this disconnection, many maintained spiritual engagement online:

- YouTube sermons (58%)
- WhatsApp Bible study groups (44%)
- TikTok faith influencers (36%)

These findings echo broader national data: while 92% of Kenyans identify as religious, only 38% of urban youth attend weekly religious services (Afro barometer, 2022). This highlights a shift from communal ritual participation toward personalized, media-mediated spirituality.

### **The Rise of Individualized and Hybrid Spiritualities**

Approximately 40% of participants reported engaging in alternative spiritual practices such as meditation (28%), yoga (16%), and African religion (12%). Notably, these practices often coexisted with a continued identification with Christianity—76% of those involved in alternative spirituality still considered themselves Christian. This blending of traditions reflects a growing trend toward individualized and hybrid spiritualities, where young adults construct personalized faith paths that draw from diverse religious and cultural sources. This shift is often driven by a desire for emotional well-being, authenticity, and spiritual relevance in a fast-paced, urbanized environment.



As one 24-year-old digital marketer shared, “I still believe in God, but I also meditate and read about chakras. It helps me stay grounded.” A 30-year-old fitness instructor added, “Yoga helps me manage stress better than any sermon. I listen to gospel music while stretching—it’s all part of how I connect with God now.” Meanwhile, a 29-year-old graphic designer who practices African religion explained, “My grandmother taught me to pour libation and honor ancestors. I still go to church sometimes, but African religion reminds me of where I come from.” These accounts highlight a syncretic spiritual landscape where traditional beliefs, wellness practices, and ancestral ties are interwoven based on personal experience and cultural meaning.

This phenomenon aligns with Heelas and Woodhead’s (2005) concept of the “subjective turn,” which suggests that personal experience increasingly serves as the foundation for spiritual authority. Rather than conforming to institutional norms, many young adults in Rūaka are reimagining their spiritual lives through a lens of self-defined relevance, cultural rootedness, and psychological resonance. This points to a broader reconfiguration of faith in contemporary urban Kenya, where the sacred is not abandoned, but reshaped.

### **Disillusionment with religious authority**

A recurring theme among participants was growing disillusionment with religious leadership and institutions, often seen as lacking integrity, relevance, or compassion. Many young adults expressed frustration with what they perceived as performative or profit-driven leadership. As a 26-year-old university student shared, “Pastors preach about humility, but they drive big cars and live like celebrities. It’s hard to take them seriously.” Others voiced disappointment with the church’s silence or complicity in the face of pressing social issues. A 31-year-old civil rights volunteer remarked, “When the country was in crisis, I expected the church to speak up. Instead, they stayed quiet or took sides. That broke my trust.” These sentiments were echoed by a 28-year-old woman who had stopped attending church entirely: “I felt judged for asking questions. They want obedience, not honesty.” Such experiences reveal a deepening gap between institutional religion and the moral expectations of younger generations. This disillusionment has pushed many to seek more open, inclusive, and reflective spaces for spiritual exploration—whether online, in informal gatherings, or through personal practices.

### **Rise of moral autonomy and ethical subjectivism**

While 88% of participants self-identified as Christian, only 24% strictly adhered to church doctrines, especially on contentious issues like abortion and contraception. Instead, core personal values such as kindness (92%), respect (88%), and social justice (60%) took

precedence in their moral reasoning. This shift illustrates a move toward moral autonomy, where ethical decisions are guided more by individual conscience than institutional mandates. As a 30-year-old graphic designer expressed, “I’m still a Christian—I believe in love and treating people well. But I don’t think I need church to do that.” Similarly, a 25-year-old university student reflected, “I question some church teachings because they don’t fit with what I feel is right. My faith is about how I live; not rules I have to follow.” These perspectives embody Smith and Denton’s (2005) concept of moralistic therapeutic deism, where religion centers on personal well-being and subjective morality rather than strict conformity to doctrine. Together, these findings highlight how young adults in Rūaka are embracing ethical subjectivism as part of a broader redefinition of spirituality and moral identity.

### **Urban Life, Digital Media, and Global Spiritual Connectivity**

The urban digital environment profoundly influences how young adults in Rūaka engage with spirituality. An overwhelming 92% of participants identified digital platforms as key sources of spiritual formation, with popular usage spanning YouTube (76%), WhatsApp and Face book groups (60%), Instagram (48%), and podcasts (32%). As one 22-year-old student shared, “I follow a Nigerian preacher on YouTube, but I also do mindfulness journaling. It’s a mix.” Another participant, a 27-year-old software developer, explained, “I don’t go to church every Sunday anymore, but I listen to sermons on my phone and join online prayer groups when I can.” This blending of global spiritual content and personalized practice exemplifies Charles Taylor’s (2007) concept of “cross pressures,” where individuals negotiate multiple, often competing faith narratives alongside secular worldviews. The demands of urban life—such as busy schedules and high mobility—have contributed to declining physical church attendance, but simultaneously expanded access to informal, online, and hybrid spiritual expressions. This digital connectivity enables youth to curate spiritual experiences that resonate with their unique contexts, bridging local traditions with transnational influences.

## **8. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of this study underscore the need for religious institutions, policymakers, and educators to respond proactively to the evolving spiritual landscape among young adults in urban Kenyan contexts such as Rūaka. Traditional models of church engagement appear increasingly disconnected from the lived realities and spiritual preferences of younger generations, who are gravitating toward digital platforms and personalized moral frameworks. It is imperative that religious organizations incorporate digital media into their outreach and

pastoral strategies, fostering inclusive, dialogical spaces that reflect the values of community, relevance, and authenticity emphasized in philosophies like Ubuntu. Furthermore, educational programs and social policies should address the fluid and hybrid nature of contemporary spirituality, supporting youth in their pursuit of moral autonomy and pluralistic spiritual expressions. Cross-sector collaboration between religious leaders, policymakers, and digital content creators may facilitate the development of innovative, contextually responsive models that enhance spiritual engagement while promoting social cohesion.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

This study reveals the complex and multifaceted nature of spirituality among young adults in Rūaka, shaped by the dynamics of urban life, digital media, and transnational influences. Although traditional church attendance is waning, many young people continue to identify as spiritual or Christian, engaging in hybrid practices that integrate institutional doctrines with alternative spiritualities and individualized ethical frameworks. The prominence of moral autonomy and ethical subjectivism among participants reflects a broader trend toward personalized faith experiences, supported by access to diverse spiritual content online. Theoretical frameworks such as Berger's secularization theory, Ubuntu philosophy, and moralistic therapeutic deism provide valuable insights into these shifting religious identities. As urban contexts continue to transform, religious communities and policymakers must adopt adaptive, inclusive approaches to remain relevant and supportive of youth navigating their spiritual journeys in a rapidly changing socio-cultural environment.

## **10. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I am grateful to the young adults of Rūaka who generously shared their experiences and insights, making this study possible. Special thanks to the local churches and online communities that facilitated access to diverse spiritual perspectives. I also appreciate the guidance of academic mentors and colleagues who contributed valuable feedback throughout the research process.

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