FAITH, SCIENCE, AND NONRELIGIOUS IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG MALE KENYAN YOUTH

by Kevin Muriithi Ndereba

Abstract. The faith and science dialogue has received scholarly attention in the recent past. Within the African landscape at large, the underlying assumption has been that Africans are religious. However, there has been a rising cohort of Africans who are increasingly identified as nonreligious or atheist or agnostic. This research presents a qualitative analysis of the sociocultural factors that affect or influence these minority identities within a pluralistic African context, exploring their emergence and diversities within the African context, with a specific focus on 20 male Kenyan youth who are identified as nonreligious. This research utilized purposive sampling within nonreligious groups and networks. Second, this research aims at exploring how nonreligious identities are constructed, particularly given the concomitant issues surrounding emerging adulthood and new media. This builds up on the theories around youth and identity formation, while foregrounding science and belief as a central theme of study.

Keywords: atheism in Africa; religious identity; science and belief; science and religion; youth and (non) religion

Introduction: Are Africans Religious?

Sociological studies within sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have always been anchored on the assumption that "Africans are religious." Religious studies within the continent pursue this direction premised on the influential philosopher of religion, John Mbiti who foregrounded the study of religions in the African continent through a study of 300 concepts of God in the continent (Mbiti 1970, 1990). The statistics within SSA support this thesis that Africa is a highly religious continent. In Kenya's 2019 census, for example, Christianity accounts for 85.5%, Islam accounts for 11% while other religious minorities comprise less than 2%, including Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, and those adhering to various traditional religious beliefs (KNBS 2019, 422). According to the census, atheists account for 755,750 people in the country, with the three highest atheist counties as Kilifi

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(146,669), Nakuru (67,640), and Nairobi (54,841). In the census, 73,253 claimed they do not know their religion and 6,909 did not state any religious affiliation. These "neutral" religious identities can be attributed to social stigma particularly significant in a culture that values communalism and rewards in-group notions of trust and togetherness (Abbott and Mollen 2018; Devellennes and Loveless 2022, 5). The point is that the numbers may be higher than those reported.

Nonreligion has gained prominence as a sociological category within the West in the past half century (Lee 2015b; Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016, 4). Several institutes and networks, such as the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC, founded in 2005) and the International Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN, founded in 2008), are markers of empirical approaches to the study of nonreligion (Lee 2015b, 4). This increased focus can be attributed to the secularization theory suggested in the sociology of religion, antecedent with rising liberal democracies, modernization, individualism, and free-thinking movements in the West, and originating from the "anthropocentric focus" of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century enlightenment (Taylor 2017; Molteni 2020, 10, 221). Additionally, the growing category of those who are identified as nones has piqued the interest of sociologists of religion. However, Berger (1999, 2) has revisited his earlier secularization thesis by critically examining the theory, given the growing religiosity in many societies, and Gorski and Altınordu (2008) argue that what is needed is more empirical approaches that study specific cohorts of the population rather than generalized theories. The rise of religion, and particularly Christianity in the southern hemisphere continues to support this "desecularization" thesis (Jenkins 2011).

Together with the rise of humanist, atheist, and nonreligious groups, markers such as church attendance, religious beliefs as well as waning religious identities reveal that much of Europe and North America is in a post-Christian context (Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016, 5). In the literature, the concept of nonreligion is correlated with either lack of beliefs or lack of affiliation (Clarke 2009; Jong 2015). However, other scholars are more critical toward this approach of objective definition, critiquing it on its overdependence on the concept of "religion," which can be subjective and "fuzzy" (Jong 2015). For instance, Jong (2015, 21) considers a level of "Christian atheism" among liberal Anglicans and "atheistic religiosity" among secular humanists as examples of how boundaries of religion and nonreligion often oscillate. Recent studies on the beliefs and lived realities of atheist scientists unpack how these identities are often nuanced, compared to the traditional definitions (Elsdon-Baker 2020; Ecklund and Johnson 2021).

For instance, Ecklund and Johnson's (2021) research among atheist scientists reveals that some of them value the role of religion in public life

or appreciate the role of religion among their religious spouses. In the Indian context, Thomas (2017, 46) uses ethnographic data from Indian scientists who are identified as atheist and argues that they eschew the simplistic western labels. To him, these biologists, theoretical physicists, ecologists, a scientist in molecular reproduction, and a Geometric scientist, while having strong Darwinist and materialist influences, categorize themselves as "agnostics," "sceptics," and "nontheists" (Thomas 2017, 56). More instructively, Thomas (2017, 59–60) proposes that where these Indian strands of atheisms differs from the Western counterparts is how they still value traditional religious ideas, practices, and symbols—for example, religious naming, festivals, songs, and pilgrimages. Additionally, Lee (2015b, 8) collating research in the field of nonreligion, observes how atheism could be defined as "hard" or "soft," "positive" or "negative," and secularism can be understood as "moderate" or "radical." Lee's contribution is that she creates a theoretical framework for substantive definitions and understandings of what nonreligion is rather than what it is not. These pointers in the literature reveal broader definitions of the concepts beyond the usual popular representations of the same in society. This research seeks to go beneath the popular presentations of faith and science among nonreligious youth by considering the actual data from African nonreligious youth.

A Neglected Area of Study: Nonreligion in Africa

Despite the fact that religion is still central to African societies, an interesting demographic needs critical investigation. With the rise of atheist and humanist societies in parts of Africa like Cape Town, Johannesburg, Lagos, Nairobi, and Accra, sociological studies that foreground this African phenomenon are needed. This article explores African nonreligious youth in Kenya through a qualitative study in order to investigate the science and faith dialogue that is central in the field of study. Although religious studies in the continent reveal a significant body of work from sociological, theological, philosophical, and psychological perspectives, there is a gap in scholarly attention on nonreligion in the continent. This article seeks to contribute to the research on the relationship between science and belief in the global South, particularly from a Kenyan context.

Nonreligion is defined from the locus of religion. Within sociological research, religious identity is examined in its relationship with families of origin or experiences with institutionalized forms of religion (Spickard 2017, 14). However, both nonreligious and religious identity are growing in complexities given more individualistic approaches to religion and spirituality, access to plurality in worldview options as a result of digital cross-pollination and the growth of scientific development, that has led to more critical approaches towards inherited traditions and cultures—leading to

broadened definitions of terms such as religious or nonreligious (Cotter 2020). Much more research is needed within the SSA context, so as to contribute meaningfully to the rich conversation within the global context.

Youth, Religious and Nonreligious Identity Formation

Examining the intersection between youth and (non) religion, some scholars have painted a broad brush on the canvas that reveals three related areas: society/institutions, personal experiences and gender/sexuality (Arweck and Shipley 2019). Both from literature and anecdotal experiences, there has been a growing dissatisfaction between young people and institutions such as schools, universities, governments, and churches. Part of this growing divide can be attributed to the collapse of institutions and their failure to assist young people to successfully transition into adulthood. Young people's personal experiences with those who are different than them attributed to increasing plural societies, means that they have a wider appreciation of other people's beliefs and identities, than prior generations. This is as true in more culturally liberal Western societies as it is within more conservative African societies. Writing for the British context, Madge, Hemming, and Stenson (2014, 2) investigate how rural-urban migrations affect young people's engagement with religion especially as a result of increasing liberal values and conflicting discourses on individual rights. Within the context of gender and sexuality, the rise of gender minorities within African contexts has been received in mixed ways. All this means that the concept of identity is more fluid and possibly fragmented, as compared to decades prior where communities were more monolithic.

Within the Kenyan context, a research study explores the worldview construction among 88 "de-churched" youth in Nairobi city (Ndereba 2015). What emerged within the study supports the wider academic studies surrounding those who have left "organized Christianity." Reasons for these nonreligious identities could be traced to factors such as divergent philosophical views concerning reality, broadened religious identities, moral failures of religious leaders, the rise of scientism, and its combative posture toward religions and the absence of "open spaces" that would allow young people to safely critique their own perspectives. Given the massive shifts within post-COVID contexts, the number of young people being disillusioned with religious institutions has been growing in light of recent narratives of religious "deconstruction" (Mudge 2021). Within Christian studies, these deconstructed religious identities have critiqued notions of institutions, faith, and identity, with the goal of spearheading more innovative, individualistic, and affirming expressions of Christianity (Marti and Ganiel 2014). This article seeks to explore

the concept of African nonreligion particularly among young people in Kenya.

Religious identities are central ways in which East African youth view themselves. Although "youth" and "ethnicity" are important identities through which young people develop and transmit their values, religion plays an important role within societal settings of East African youth in Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda (Awiti and Orwa 2019, 426–27). Religion is an important way in which adolescents can synthesize their other identities into one whole (De Bruin-Wassinkmaat, De Kock, Visser-Vogel, Bakker and Barnard 2019, 72). Within the literature, the concept of adolescent identity formation is grounded in Erikson's theory of development which speaks of how young people structure childhood concepts of self and world into a coherent whole (De Bruin-Wassinkmaat, De Kock, Visser-Vogel, Bakker, and Barnard 2019, 72), what Erikson (1968, 136) himself refers to as the "counterpointing as well as the fusing of identities." Elsewhere, Erikson (1968, 83) observes that the rituals involved in religious life bring wholeness to people as they go through the crises of life. Thus, religious identity remains a critical concept for understanding young people. This article considers how the faith and science dialogue has shaped nonreligious identity formation among Kenyan youth.

Research Methodology

A Qualitative Study

This article utilizes a qualitative approach. First, the target population of the study, that is, nonreligious Kenyan youth, can be defined as a religious minority. This means that a quantitative approach would not only be time consuming but fraught with difficulty in accessing these religious minorities. Second, the aim of the study, which is to explore the relationship between science and belief among nonreligious Kenyan youth, is suited best for a qualitative approach, where rather than offering generalizations, qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena (Merriam and Tisdell 2016, 96). Brink (1995, 464), noting the various approaches to qualitative research, appreciates its role in unpacking phenomena as well as offering "empathic evocativeness" that primes richness of data rather than broad consensus. Additionally, this approach deals with the research methodological challenges that beset studying such a population within a religious society such as Kenya (Gez, Beider and Dickow 2021). In the recent study of science and religion, researchers have however utilized mixed research methods so as to balance both richness and consensus in data (Catto, Jones, Kaden, and Elsdon-Baker 2019; Elsdon-Baker and Mason-Wilkes 2019).

Research Instrument and Sampling

The research instrument was designed using Google Forms with the aim of collecting data around specific thematic areas. The method utilized a questionnaire, given the research was conducted during COVID thereby making face-to-face focused group interviews, for example, slightly difficult. The questionnaire included a number of open-ended questions that allowed for respondents to articulate their "context-specific" views (Marvasti 2004, 12). Given that the research is focused on young people, age was a critical consideration. Appreciating how complex nonreligious identities can be viewed in the Kenyan context, open-ended questions were used that allowed the respondents to define their nonreligious identity using their own words. The research also incorporated a question that explored the role of nonreligious groups or societies in their nonreligious identity formation, and these are discussed in the following sections. The role of nonreligious authority figures in youth nonreligious identity formation was explored, particularly through either their authoritative texts or social media presence. The research instrument also tested the level of compatibility or incompatibility between faith and science, and their impact on the nonreligious identities as well as their role in answering the big questions of life. The research instrument went live on March 14, 2022 until April 23, 2022. The research instrument was piloted to ensure it fits in with the scope of the International Research Network for the Study of Science and Belief in Society (INSSBS). Given the minority status of nonreligious youth in Kenya, the research instrument was distributed digitally through youth networks, that is, Apologetics Kenya, Nairobi Youth Workers Network, Atheists in Kenya, and Kenyan Free Thinkers groups. Further, this research was based on purposive nonprobabilistic sampling method (Merriam and Tisdell 2016, 96). The research instrument was initially distributed on March 14, 2022 and got 11 responses. It was resubmitted on April 20, 2022 to seek more female respondents. The total responses came to 22. The only female response was from a 44-year-old lady, who was excluded from the analysis due to age demographic not fitting the research target of "youth," bringing the total analyzed responses to 20. One other response was ignored due to age limit, that is, 40 years old. Twenty responses were seen as sufficient in ensuring against research saturation (Merriam and Tisdell 2016, 101). The responses based on the various questions in the research instrument are captured in Table 1.

Summary of Data Findings

Age. The research instrument targeted nonreligious Kenyan youth. Most of the participants were within this article's youth definition of 18–35 years. According to the Kenyan Constitution of 2010, youth are defined as people aged between 18 and 34 years (Constitution of Kenya

Table 1. Summary of key findings from Kenyan nonreligious youth

Respondent	Age	Town/City	Nonreligious identity	Nonreligious group	Nonreligious group contribution	Previous religious affiliation	Age of disaffiliation	Reason	Faith and science compatibility	Nonreligion influencer
IMS	31	Diani-Galu	Atheist	Yes	Exposure to diversity	Conservative Muslim	23	Diverse perspectives (life in UK and Kenya)	Strong incompatible	Social media
KK	30	Nairobi	Agnostic and atheist	Yes	Exposure to diversity	Christian	21	Citing 1 Cor 13:11, "leaving childish ways"	Strong incompatible	Social media
AT	20	Nairobi	Agnostic atheist	Yes	Critical engagement	Explorative Christian—Baptist, Anglican, Catholic	16	Unanswered questions	Soft compatible	Social media
GK	36	Nairobi, Kenya	Atheist	No	No	Strong Anglican	32	Intellectual questions—Africa, evolution, suffering	Strong incompatible	Social media
MA	31	Mombasa	Atheist	Yes	No	Christian	18	Just happened	Neutral	Social media
KK2	35	Thika	Atheist	Yes	Exposure to diversity	Protestant Christian	16	Love of science—influenced by four horsemen	Neutral	Social media
UA	28	Nairobi	Atheist	No	Exposure to diversity	Christian	23	Intellectual questions	Strong incompatible	Social media
LE	25	Nakuru	Atheist	No	No	Catholic	10	Intellectual questions—history, science, critical thinking	Strong incompatible	Book
LK	21	Mururi	Agnostic	No	Not in a nonreligious group—but same sentiment	Christian	18	Intellectual questions—violence, barbaric laws, sacrifices	Strong incompatible	Social media
ZW	35	Nairobi	Atheist	No	Critical engagement	Christian	22	Just happened	Strong incompatible	Book
MWW	35	Mombasa	Atheist	Yes	Exposure to diversity	Staunch Christian	25	Intellectual questions—immorality advocated by the Bible	Strong incompatible	Social media

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued)

Respondent	Age	Town/City	Nonreligious identity	Nonreligious group	Nonreligious group contribution	Previous religious affiliation	Age of disaffiliation	Reason	Faith and science compatibility	Nonreligion influencer
EN	22	Eldoret	Atheist	Yes	Not in a nonreligious group	Christian family	17	Irrationality	Neutral	Book
NNN	27	Kakamega	Atheist	No	Critical engagement	Christian (even part of Church staff)	25		Soft incompatible	Social media
K.I	27	Nairobi	Agnostic	Yes	Exposure to diversity—religion helps people cope with crisis	Christian (even studied theology)		Intellectual questions—moral failures, evolutionary theories, a few people going to heaven, many moral ppl going to hell	Strong compatible	Book
MW	27	Murang'a	Atheist	Yes	Not really	Christian (even youth pastor)	22	"Critical thinking"	Strong incompatible	Social media
FD	24	Nairobi	Atheist	Yes	Not really. "Too much arguing over nothing"	Christian Protestant	19	Philosophy and psychology	Strong incompatible	Printed book atheist
MM	24	Juja	Humanist	No	No	Christian	20	Analyzing own beliefs	Soft incompatible	Printed books (scientists and atheists)
RM	24	Nairobi	Agnostic	Yes	Exposure to diversity	Christian	8	Hypocrisy	Neutral	Social/digital media
WJ	28	Mbale	Agnostic	Yes	Critical engagement	Christian (SDA)	23	Logical thinking	Strong incompatible	Digital media
JK	21	Nairobi	Atheist	No	Critical engagement	Christian (Roman Catholic)	16	Intellectual issues—Bible's vagueness, proof for God's existence, age of the universe compared to scientific evidence	Strong incompatible	Printed books "I don't rely on internet"

2010). This is a revision of the 2007 National Youth Policy, retained in the revised Kenya National Youth Development Policy, which had previously categorized youth as those aged 15–30 years (KYDP 2018). However, the United Nations definition of youth is 15–24 years, and the East African Community (EAC) defines youth as those between 15 and 35 years (DFID 2018). In Table 1, one response from a female (the only female among the respondents) 44-year-old was ignored, as well as 40-year-old response, as they do not fit into the age demographic. The research included GK, who is 36 years old and still close to the upper limit of youth according to this article's definition of youth. The age profile of the research respondents is as follows:

- Minimum age—21 years
- Maximum age—36 years
- Average age—28.18 years

Nonreligious Identity. Although nonreligious identities are many, in this research, most participants are identified as atheist (n = 13); four are identified as agnostic (n = 4) and two as "atheist and agnostic" (n = 2); one is identified as humanist (n = 1). While providing the nonreligious identity options "atheist," "agnostic," or "other," the research instrument included an open-ended section to allow for more variation in nonreligious identification. However, it seems that for the participants, nonreligious identities occur primarily across agnostic and atheistic identities, with a small minority being humanist. This could be as a result of the salience of organized nonreligion or restricted latitude in the participant's nonreligious understanding. Further studies could unpack these nonreligious identifications to study whether there is any ambivalence in nonreligious identification in the Kenyan context, similar to what Lee (2015a) has argued for within a North American context.

Nonreligious Groups. Most participants see a positive role of nonreligious groupings to their nonreligious identities. From the researcher's coding of the data, two contributions of nonreligious groups emerged, namely, exposure and critical engagement. It seems that for most participants, their core concern in religion or nonreligion was dealing with diversity of views or ability to critically engage with this diversity. For instance,

> Due to free exchange of ideas among members, better understanding of the world is bound. (KK)

> It has exposed me to debate and different perspectives. (IMS)

These positive contributions of nonreligious groups to nonreligious identity formation can be interpreted in the reasons for disaffiliation. Most

respondents view their previous religious affiliations as unhelpful to their intellectual questions, Christian representations of suffering as problematic, and see Christian complicity with injustices in contemporary religious life among many other issues. Additionally, some viewed religion as a static body of beliefs that are resistant to change, whereas science allowed for them to examine facts and change positions upon better evidence. Nonreligious groups were therefore seen as helping the respondents to examine beliefs about the world that they had been exposed to in their earlier years, as well as to cognitively resolve their intellectually problematic issues.

Previous Religious Affiliation. Most respondents came from a religious background. This can be correlated to the religiosity that is part of Kenyan societal life. Christianity (85.5%) and Islam (11%) contribute significant percentages of the religious affiliation of Kenyans. In the 2019 Kenyan census, Protestants, Catholics, and Evangelical churches accounted for 33.4%, 20.6%, and 20.4%, respectively, among the Christian population (KNBS 2019, 12). Among the 20 research participants, 19 came from a Christian background while 1 came from a Muslim background.

Among the Christians, some used particular markers such as "staunch," "strong," "born again," "baptized," and "saved," to describe how deeply involved they were in their Christian upbringing. Others also noted "raised in a Christian family," revealing how religious affiliation is also transmitted through the family unit. This supports the sociological research that reveals how belief is connected to belonging, and how religious belief and unbelief is transmitted through families (Catto and Eccles 2013, 47). Although religious belief may not always be consistently transmitted, the argument is that family background influences how youth engage with religion.

Two responses were coded as "explorative Christian" to show how, as per their responses, these two specific people had gone through two or more Christian identities. For example, AT formerly was previously identified as Baptist, Anglican, and Catholic. Although these Christian identities (or denominations) may have some strong divergences on particular religious beliefs, young people's "multiple belonging" reveal how ambivalent young people are with regard to specific denominational beliefs (Okwuosa, Uroko, Mokwenye, Agbo, and Ekwueme 2020). According to the research participants, religion is thus seen as more than merely particular beliefs.

Reasons for Religious Disaffiliation. Most of the reasons given by the research participants concerning their disaffiliation was the inability of their religious background in helping them to deal with their intellectual questions. It is interesting to correlate the age of disaffiliation among the participants with the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. As a growing research area in developmental psychology, emerging adulthood is seen as a period of extending adolescence beyond the late teens into the

mid-twenties (Arnett 2007). Arnett (2007, 70–71), a key theorist of emerging adulthood, for example, notes how the identity crisis of emerging adulthood is a reality of young people in this stage of life who are participating in post-secondary education, expressing greater tolerance in premarital sexual activities and cohabitation and delaying marriage and parenthood. In the Kenyan context, the 18–30 years bracket is the time of university education, entry into the labor market, and the consequential exposure to and engagement with divergent worldviews. With these significant life changes that happen in the lives of young people, questions of origin, purpose, morality and destiny are common. The research respondents suggested that organized religious communities did not help them answer these important questions.

> I felt like there were many gaps in Christianity i.e., wondering why Africans don't feature in the Bible yet science (evolution) puts across a very convincing case that Africa is the cradle of mankind. Evolution theory sounds more convincing to me than the Bible's creation theory which doesn't feature Africans. I wondered how God can love us all equally then allow people in developing countries to suffer more than the counter parts in developed countries. These concerns prompted me to look for like-minded people online and locally. (GK)

> I struggled with the question of suffering, and I didn't find the Christian answer to it sufficient. I was thinking of going into missions and wanted to know why non-Christians i.e., Muslims, Hindus, etc. don't believe in the Bible and Christianity. This made me want to understand Christianity better, I took a deep dive into learning about the history of the church and the origin of the Bible using academic lectures available on YouTube. Later wanting to understand non-Christians I watched a lot of atheist vs Christian debates. Trying to understand the issues why they didn't believe. But then I started wrestling with some of the points atheists raised because they were actually valid. This took a period of several months until in 2020 when the COVID 19 pandemic happened, it occurred to me that a loving God wouldn't send viruses to kill millions. And I knew we would only see a scientific solution and not a supernatural solution. Then I embraced scepticism. (NNN)

Evidently, key questions that emerge among nonreligious youth include the colonial history of Kenya (and Africa) and the place of religion, the religious understanding of creation vis a vis the scientific theory of evolution as well as dealing with the problematic issues of religion and religious texts—including contemporary suffering, the reality of violence in the Old Testament, and understanding the ancient contexts and sacrifices that color much of Christian understanding. For the respondents, their leaving of organized religion was premised on the fact that their communities of faith did not help them explore these important questions.

Faith and Science Perspectives

The heart of this article is exploring the role of faith and science dialogue in the nonreligious identity formation of Kenyan youth. One of the questions used a Likert scale (1 = strongly incompatible to 5 = strongly compatible) to measure the level of compatibility between faith and science among the nonreligious youth. The results were as follows:

- A majority of the respondents view faith and science as "strongly incompatible" (n = 13).
- A minority view faith and science as neutral (n = 4).
- A minority of views reveal either "soft compatibility" (n = 1) or "soft incompatibility" (n = 1).
- A minority view faith and science as "strongly compatible" (n = 1).

Factors Contributing to Compatibility. Those who view religion and science as compatible have a wider understanding of the role of both religion and science.

> Scientists can be and are religious. However, it occasionally means that they have to ignore their beliefs. (AT)

> In many ways, they are compatible. This is because religion is largely moral in nature, while science is more material. The contrast comes in when religion tries to explain the genesis of the material world, which science refutes. (KI)

One of the respondents with a neutral view on the compatibility of faith and science based their argument on the scientific enterprise as probabilistic:

> Most theories before carried out are not necessarily based on evidence but probabilities of the unknown before being actualized. (RM)

In summary, nonreligious Kenyan youth who think religion and science are compatible base their argument on:

- The value of religion in answering some of the big questions, for example, morality.
- The distinct natures of religion and science. One respondent, for example, demarcated the religious sphere as dealing with more moral questions, while the scientific experience dealing with more of the material questions.
- The presence of believing scientists. One respondent, however, claimed that such scientists have to jettison their faith as they conduct their scientific enterprises.

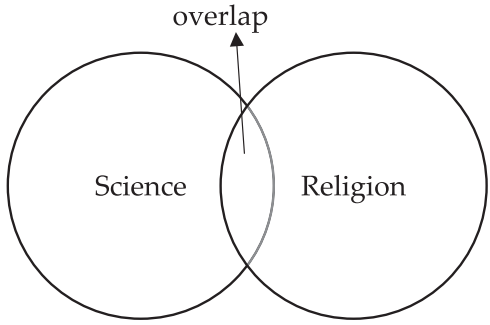

Figure 1. Relationship between faith and science.

- The humanitarian progress of religion as valuable, for example, in the growth of schools and hospitals in Kenya's history.

Factors Contributing to Incompatibility. Strong views on the incompatibility have to do mainly with the definition and understanding of both faith (for the purpose of this article, religion) and science. Those who revealed a strong view of incompatibilism between religion and science, largely base their understanding of religion as myth, and science as fact.

Respondents who viewed religion as incompatible with science based their view largely on the areas of nonoverlap between the two. Most cite evolutionary theory, creation stories, the nature of evidence, historical narratives such as Galileo's arrest and the incompatibility of faith and reason. These are the common debates in the religion and science debate within contemporary research. Dixon (2008, 3), for example, notes how the history of science reveals that the relationship between religion and science eschews simplistic contemporary views on both sides of the equation.

Dixon (2008, 4) helpfully nuances the conflict by noting that the issue is not a generalized view of religion or science for that matter, but specific beliefs about a particular religion and specific scientific views. An example is how within both religious and scientific communities, there are divergent views on the theory of evolution. A surprising fact is how Muslim scholars helped to translate Darwin's evolutionary works or the diversity of creationism into old-earth, young-earth, creationist-evolutionist, and intelligent design (ID) categories (Dixon, Cantor and Pumfrey 2010, 11; Szerszynski 2010, 156). Although science and religion have distinct spheres of operation—for example, science may tell us of the configuration of DNA or the mechanisms of online digital systems while religion may speak of a heaven or hell, or the concept of salvation—real contentions, from the research, arise from the areas of overlap, as can be seen in Figure 1. A case in point is that both science and religion make claims on

the origin of the universe that are interpreted differently by different people, even those who share similar religious or nonreligious convictions. Depending on how people approach these, they can either view religion and science as compatible or incompatible and may in turn either nuance their religious or nonreligious identities.

The research also revealed that figures of authority as well as social media (or new media) were contributing factors to the respondents' nonreligious identity formation. One of the questions was designed to test whether the respondents' religious identity was formed largely by:

- Digital platform of prominent scientist
- Digital platform of prominent atheist
- Printed book on a scientific topic
- Printed book from a nonreligious thinker

"Digital platform of prominent scientist" ranked top, with most responses revealing that their nonreligious identity (atheist, agnostic, agnostic-atheist) has been formed largely through the digital platforms of prominent atheists. The respondents cited YouTube channels of the "Four Horsemen," Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris. This supports the research that traces the interconnection of youth nonreligion and atheism, with online cultures within the digitally native generations (Catto and Eccles 2013, 53). This categorization of "atheist" and "scientist" was used in order to understand the influencers of nonreligious youth. Will Mason-Wilkes (personal communication, May 20, 2022) notes how the responses from nonreligious youth is telling as it portrays their view that the terms "scientist" and "atheist" are synonymous. This is quite revealing given only really one of the "Four Horseman," Dawkins, is a "scientist" (and most of his science he did a long time ago)—Dennett is a philosopher, Hitchens a journalist/pundit, and Harris a philosopher who calls himself a neuroscientist. Other responses included the printed books of nonreligious thinkers, with one noting that they embraced atheism before the boom of digital media. Others cited the writings of Yuval Noah, Malcom Gladwell, Jordan Peterson, and Albert Einstein, as contributing to their nonreligious identities.

Religious Views of Nonreligious Youth. Finally, most respondents revealed a hostile perspective toward religion in their responses. Although some noted that they would not debate religious people or that they respect their religious affiliation, even though they make no sense to them, they described religion as:

- "derailing critical thinking and undermines scientific progress;"
- hampers personal and societal development;

- "it does not change, it is archaic;"
- "it encroaches on personal autonomy and freedom;"
- "it was brought by colonists and Arab conquests;"
- "it is a tool of exploitation of the poor;"
- focused on otherworldliness rather than today's issues;
- is about "chasing blessings, favor, money, and so on, through faith."

Only three responses on the question "do you think religion is beneficial to the progress of African societies?" seemed sympathetic to religion:

> Social mobilization and humanitarian work e.g. mission hospitals and schools help to solve actual problems in society. (NNN)

> History teaches us so. (KI)

> It instils a sense of hope and purpose in most people and maintains law and order. (MW)

Interestingly, both NNN and MW were pastoral staff in their previous religious communities. However, their responses show how ambivalent the science-religion dialogue is among different groups of people. MW, for example, noted that science and religion are strongly incompatible because "the two disciplines seem to not have the same conclusions." However, while his incompatibility rests on the different functions of both domains, he still appreciates the role of religion in giving hope and maintaining order in the society. What requires more research is the strong incompatibility of science and religion among nonreligious (atheist) Kenyan youth. Is it due to generalizations informed by their authority figures, or merely personal opinion or biased by their nonreligious group "beliefs"? It would be interesting to bring this incompatibility with Mason-Wilke's (2020, 22) findings where he contrasts media representations of science as either religious, when it is presented as dogmatic, or secular, when it is presented as provisional. Likewise, popular religion that is presented as oversimplistic fails to supply the explanatory justification needed by young people navigating cultural transformations, digital spaces as well as complex questions. As some have argued, nonreligious identity can be correlated with strong incompatible views between science and religion, while religious identity can be correlated with compatibilism between science and religion, even though particular views on each may differ from person to person depending on the specific "content" of either domain of knowledge (Leicht et al. 2021, 5).

Conclusion

This research provides a social science perspective on the faith-science dialogue within the particular context of nonreligious Kenyan youth. The research revealed that while Kenya is considered as a religious nation, there is a growing demographic of those who are identified as nonreligious. Although nonreligious is an identity marker that can be simplistically understood as a sociological category, this research confirmed studies that show that nonreligion can be ambivalent and this is seen among Kenyan youth who are identified as both agnostic and atheist, as well as atheist youth who reveal that their unbelief has not been fostered within a nonreligious group setting.

This research revealed several insights. First, nonreligious identification is common across the period of emerging adulthood. The research shows how youth social groups with young people in their late teens and twenties can provide them with spaces to wrestle with the intellectual questions raised by religious faiths. Some of the questions within the Kenyan context, as per the research respondents, include theodicies (i.e., theistic arguments dealing with the problem of pain, evil, and suffering), the missionary and colonial historical past and its antecedents today, the problems posed by a type of Christianity that promises material prosperity but leaves those affiliating with these types of Christian expressions poor and the difficulties of Biblical interpretation—including the problem of violence in the Old Testament, the cultural distance between the contemporary reader, and the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) context of rites such as sacrifices and other rituals and the reality of hell, as a theological category in Christian thought.

Second, this research reveals that the science and religion dialogue is critical to have so as to create deeper understanding within religious and nonreligious communities. Religious communities could benefit through providing spaces where young people exposed to scientific thought can wrestle with specific religious claims, such as the religious teaching on creation. Ndereba (2021) has explored how such spaces of exploration can be implemented in light of the communality ("ubuntu") aspect of African cultures while viewing the unique developmental challenges of young people in a holistic manner that bridges their affective and cognitive aspects. Nonreligious communities could benefit through moving beyond the usual caricature of strong incompatibilism that is part of popular atheist literature. Through foregrounding the faith and science dialogue, both groups would appreciate the nuanced understanding in history and contemporary practice, both within and across their different groups.

More importantly, this study contributes to the study of faith and science, particularly among young nonreligious Kenyans. Much of the literature remains embarrassingly western, and this research adds a critical voice

from the African context and particularly, an Eastern African and Kenyan perspective. This enriches the international scope of the work that INSSBS seeks to do and provides room for further research. Possible future research could explore more specific thematic areas, for instance, concerning specific scientific elements such as evolutionary theory. Further research could also target religious youth in Kenya or across Africa, thereby widening the scope and also providing room for comparative research. Further studies could also pursue a longitudinal approach to test whether the perspectives of faith and science among nonreligious Kenyan youth change over time or are static. This study is merely a surface of an iceberg, yet one that reveals the undercurrents within contemporary studies of religion and science, as well as youth religion and nonreligion.

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