

SYNCRETISM IN THE NAMUGONGO MARTYRDOM COMMEMORATIONS

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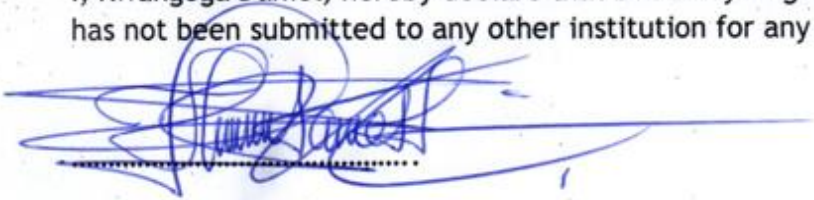


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DECLARATION

I, Rwangoga Daniel, hereby declare that this is my original work, is not plagiarized, and has not been submitted to any other institution for any award.



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APPROVAL

I hereby ap prove that this research was done by Rwangoga Daniel, under the eye of my supervision and is now ready for submission.

.....

REV. CANON DR. MOSES STEPHEN ISABIRYE

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DEDICATION

To the glory of God, whose calling, enabling grace, and sustaining power made this work possible. May it be appropriated for His glory and for the strengthening and refining of His Church.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION.....	I
APPROVAL	II
ACKNOWLEDGMENT.....	III
DEDICATION	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	V
ABSTRACT	IX
CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1.0 Background.....	1
1.1.2 Statement of the Problem.....	3
1.1.3 Purpose	3
1.1.4 Objectives.....	3
1.1.5 Research questions.....	4
1.1.6 Scope of the study.....	4
1.1.6.1 Time scope.....	4
1.1.6.2 Geographical scope	4
1.1.6.3 Content scope	4
1.1.7 Justification	4
1.1.8 Significance.....	5
1. 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW	5
1.2.1 Historical Christian perspectives on martyrdom	5
1.2.2 Martyrdoms of the Roman inquisition.....	8
1.2.3 Perspectives on Syncretism	9
1.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY (QUALITATIVE)	11
1.3.2 Research design	11
1.3.3 Area of study.....	11
1.3.4 Sources of Information.....	12
1.3.5 Study population	12
1.3.6 Sampling Techniques and procedures	12
1.3.7 Sample size	12
1.3.8 Protocols for data collection.....	13

1.3.9	Data collection instruments	13
1.3.9.1	Questionnaire survey	13
1.3.9.2	Interview Method	13
1.3.9.3	Onsite observations.....	13
1.3.10	Quality control for validity and reliability.....	14
1.3.10.1	Validity	14
1.3.10.2	Reliability	14
1.3.11	Ethical Considerations.....	14
1.3.12	Data analysis, presentation and interpretation of findings	14
1.3.13	Limitations of the Study	15
1.3.14	Delimitations of the study	16
1.3.16	Timing of the study.....	16
CHAPTER TWO: THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM		17
2.1	Introduction	17
2.2	Roots of Syncretism.....	17
2.3	Factors that fuel Religious Syncretism	18
2.4	Idolatrous Syncretism	19
2.5	Syncretism in religious Iconography	20
2.6	Ways People Erect Idols	21
(a)	False Opinions on God as Idolatrous Syncretism.....	21
(b)	Invention of Strange Means of Worship	22
2.7	Specific Old Testament cases of idolatrous syncretism.....	23
2.8	New Testament Perspectives on Idolatrous syncretism.....	26
2.9	Idols as Teachers of Lies	27
2.10	Decking and adornment of Churches	27
2.11	Kinds of False Gods.....	28
2.12	Dangers of idolatrous syncretism.....	31
2.13	The role of godly rulers in addressing syncretism	33
2.14	Church History on Idolatrous Syncretism	37
2.15.1	Jerome on Idolatrous Syncretism.....	39
2.15.2	Origen on Idolatrous Syncretism	39
2.15.3	Athanasius on Idolatrous Syncretism.....	39
2.15.4	Lactantius on Idolatrous Syncretism	39

2.15.5 Cyril of Alexandria on Idolatrous Syncretism	40
2.15.6 Bishop Epiphanius on Idolatrous Syncretism	40
2.15.7 Augustine on Idolatrous Syncretism	42
2.15.8 The Record of Eusebius Pamphylus	42
2.15.9 Public Decrees Against Idolatrous Syncretism	43
2.15.10 Bishop Serenus of Marseille’s Intervention	43
2.15.11 Gregory the Great’s Ruling on Bishop Serenus	44
2.15.12 Emperor Leo III and the Iconoclastic Movement	45
2.15.13 Emperor Constantine V and the Council of Hieria (AD 754)	45
2.15.14 Relapse under Irene Theodora	45
2.15.15 Hieria reforms overturned	46
2.15.16 The Councils of Elvira (Granada) 305-306 and Toledo XII (681)	46
2.15.17 Martyrdom Commemorations in the Early Church	47
2.15.18 The Development of Martyrdom Commemorative Practice	48
2.16 Early Church Safeguards Against Syncretism and Idolatry in Martyrdom Commemorations	49
2.17 Bishop Ambrose’s Correction of Augustine’s Mother	49
2.18 Origins of Relics, holy water Pilgrimages, Veneration of Holy Places and pilgrimages in Christianity	50
2.19 The Veneration of Holy Places and the Rise of Pilgrimages	50
2.20 Relics, Memorials, Miracles, and Mediation	52
2.21 Biblical Perspective on Water Use in Sacred Worship and holy water	52
2.22 Reformation and Puritan Theological Critiques of the Use of Relics, Holy Water, Holy Pilgrimages, Holy Places, and Martyrs Veneration	54
CHAPTER THREE: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA	56
3.1 Interview results	56
3.1.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents	56
3.1.2 Respondents’ theological and historical appreciation of the pilgrimages	56
3.1.3 Personal Motivations, Experiences, and Perceived Spiritual Benefits.	59
3.1.4 Perceptions of Holy Water, Sacred Elements, and Miraculous Claims	59
3.1.5 Veneration of Statues, Images, Museum, and Relics	64
• Museum experiences	69
3.1.6 Fanfare, Entertainment, Commercialization, and Politicization	70
3.1. 7 Biblical Soundness, Syncretism, and Church Response	71

3.1.8 Summary of Data Patterns	72
3.2 Interpretation of the data	73
3.2.1 Legitimacy of the Pilgrimage	73
3.2.2 Motivations, Experiences, and Spiritual Benefits	75
3.2.3 Holy Water, Statues, Relics, and Museum Practices: Primary Vectors of Syncretism	76
3.2.4 Commercialization, Politicization, and Fanfare	76
CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS	79
4.1.3 Motivations, Experiences, and Perceived Spiritual Benefits- Heart versus Externals	80
4.1.4 Holy Water, Statues, Images, Museum Practices, and Relics: Primary Vectors of Idolatrous Syncretism	81
4.1. 5 Commercialization, Fanfare, Entertainment, and Politicization: Modern Fuels of Syncretism	82
4.3 Overall Substantiation of Syncretism	82
4.4 Strategies for Combatting and Addressing Syncretism	83
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	85
5.1 Summary of key findings and achievement of Objectives	85
5.2 Theological and Pastoral Implications	85
5.3 Recommendations	86
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY	89
Appendix 1: Work plan	i
Appendix 2 Data Collection Tools	iii
A 2.1 Questionnaire for Pilgrims	iii
A 2.2 Questionnaire for Church Scholars	vi

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the extent and nature of religious syncretism in the annual Namugongo Martyrs' Commemoration held on 3rd June at the Anglican and Catholic martyrdom shrines in Namugongo, Uganda. Since the execution of the 45 Uganda Martyrs between 1885 and 1887, the event has evolved from a solemn remembrance into a massive national pilgrimage attracting hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from Uganda and the East African region. While the commemoration seeks to honor the martyrs' faithful witness and inspire Christian commitment, growing concerns have emerged regarding the infiltration of idolatrous and syncretistic practices.

Adopting a qualitative research design, the study combined extensive theological and historical literature review with empirical data gathered through on-site observations, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews with 38 purposively selected respondents, including pilgrims, clergy, church scholars, lay elders, and shrine staff. The prevailing worship practices were critically evaluated against the standards of Holy Scripture, reason, and historic Christian tradition.

The findings reveal significant syncretistic elements, particularly the veneration of relics, holy water, sacred soil, statues, images and the martyrs' tree. Practices such as scooping and consuming soil and water for healing, commercialization, fanfare, entertainment, and politicization were identified as primary vectors of idolatrous syncretism. The tendencies risk shifting the focus of devotion from the Triune God to created objects and the martyrs themselves.

The study concludes that while commemorating the Uganda Martyrs remains biblically legitimate and spiritually valuable, urgent theological and pastoral reforms are required. It proposes practical recommendations aimed at purifying the event, safeguarding the doctrinal integrity of the Church, and ensuring that the martyrs' legacy continues to point pilgrims to Christ alone.

CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1.0 Background

Syncretism is the illegitimate mingling of pagan elements with Christianity (Ferm, 1945). It is usually an unconscious process of give and take that occurs when differing belief systems come into contact, and the elements thereof mix up to give rise to new beliefs (Hocking, 1940). Syncretism has a proven potential to blunt all pre-existing absolute claims to exclusive Christian truths, blending them with beliefs imported from other religions and cultures.

The most renown instances of syncretism are the historical intermingling of Hebrew and Hellenistic thought in early Christianity and the Ancient Israelites' inclination to worship Yahweh alongside other local, tangible deities of surrounding heathen nations, after settling in the promised land.

When people of diverse and incompatible theologies assemble together for worship, syncretism can occur and it is an easy trap through which biblical message and cultural norms can gradually integrate to a point where the two become almost indistinguishable (Engel, 1979). Resultantly, the authentic message suffers distortion and the critical prophetic voice of the church is silenced.

In the ancient world, when God sought to establish true worship in the earth, He called Abraham out of the house of his idolatrous father Terah, and led him to a land which he knew not, in order to rule out syncretism in the inception stage of this faith which we profess (Joshua 24:2 Genesis 11:18, 22-23, 26).

The Israelites' four centuries' domicile in Egypt exposed them to the worship of Egyptian gods, and corrupted the knowledge of the God of their fathers, to a point that they were so slow of heart to believe the glad tidings of divine redemption conveyed to them by Moses, because their knowledge of Jehovah was limited, and many had likely forgotten or diluted their heritage through the influence of Egyptian idolatry. The thing is further evident in their apostatic worship of Aaron's golden Calf in Exodus 32, their mixture of neighboring Canaanite religious practices into the religion of Yahweh, God's stern command to them to destroy the places where neighboring pagans worshiped their false gods (Deuteronomy 12:2-8); the burial of Moses and concealment of his grave by God himself in the valley of Baal Peor (Deuteronomy 34:6) which is perceived to have been a deterrence measure against the potential outbreak of syncretism because the people could have easily turned his body into an idol or his grave into a shrine given their idolatrous background. God buried his servant himself and ensured the location

remained completely in order to prevent the people from worshipping the dead prophet in the place of the living God.

Elijah had Jehovah's full cooperation when he slew the 850 prophets of Baal prophets in 1Kings 18 to cure the land from syncretism. Solomon's act of marrying pagan wives syncretized his heart to the worship of strange gods which he had not known.

In Hezekiah's revival, he removed the high places in Judah, broke images, cut down groves and destroyed Nehushtan, the brazen serpent which Moses had made in the wilderness, because the Israelites had been worshipping it, and offering sacrifices to it (2Kings18:1-4). The worship of the sun, moon and stars by the Israelites of Jeremiah's day (Jeremiah 8:1-6) was syncretic. God's command to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 6:13-15, to worship Him alone and not follow other gods of the peoples surrounding them lest he wipes them off the face of the earth was a bulwark against syncretism.

Between the 31st of January, 1885 and the 27th of January 1887, a group of 22 Catholic and 23 Anglican converts to Christianity, were executed for their faith at Namugongo on the orders of the king, Kabaka Mwanga of Buganda kingdom, East Africa. The gruesome murders sparked off a wave of emotional reactions in the kingdom and the surrounding region, and many people converted to Christianity. This martyrdom was the watershed moment for Christianity in Uganda.

Today, approximately 139 years since the first Uganda martyr was put to death, the church of Uganda and the Roman Catholic Church annually observe every 3rd of June, in commemoration of the Uganda martyrs, a tradition which dates from the 1920's (Omona, 2022).

In 2001, government of Uganda declared 3rd of June a national public holiday and the event has grown significantly, attracting hundreds of thousands if not millions of Pilgrims from all across the East African region. It is an event intended to water the seed that was planted by the martyrs, to inspire the faithful and to enhance the faith of the Church.

Whereas this martyrdom account as well laid down in the archives of the church is entirely undisputed, there are growing concerns from a section of Christians who hold that the annual martyrdom commemorations at Namugongo is gradually digressing from its inception goals into a soft breeding ground for religious syncretism (Okoth, 2019). They allege several idolatrous practices in the event, which have a potential of turning the people's hearts away from the worship of the true living God.

Mwambusya Ndebesa, a learned and concerned Ugandan, articulates in one of his articles thus;

“When one keenly watches the behavior of Christians at the event, one wonders whether we have still kept the faith. The amount of veneration which the masses ascribe to the objects of the two shrines, rivals that which is ascribable to God alone. Year upon another, pilgrims are seen literally scooping the soil and water to eat and drink respectively as they seek healings and blessings from the dead martyrs. At the Anglican martyrs’ shrine, pilgrims have for years been seen cutting off and eating in broad daylight, the bark of a tree on which the martyrs are said to have been tied before execution. This act of pilgrims has eventually caused the iconic tree to dry up. Some unscrupulous comen, taking advantage of the Superstition, have even gone as far as selling bark tree pieces from other species of trees from elsewhere to the unsuspecting pilgrims in the past” (Ndebesa,2014).

The above highlighted phenomenon desperately cries for a theological inquiry into the syncretic aspects underlying the martyrdom commemoration event.

1.1.2 Statement of the Problem

Whereas the historical account of the Uganda Martyrs is true in its entirety and undisputed; whereas it is of tremendous value to the Ugandan Church, and worthy of all our remembrance, there are concerns from some sections of believers, that the June 3rd Namugongo Martyrdom commemoration and pilgrimage is gradually being plagued by religious syncretism, a digression from its inception goals of corporate reflection on the faith and example of the martyrs. However, no adequate assessment of the theological and doctrinal soundness of its commemorative practice has yet been undertaken, knowledge on the subject remains scanty and the said syncretic concerns remain largely unverified and unanswered. Through a theological and ethnographic evaluation of the prevailing commemorative practice, this study sought to identify the elements of syncretism in the Namugongo martyrdom commemoration and to establish potential interventions.

1.1.3 Purpose

The purpose of the study was to identify the elements of syncretism in the Namugongo martyrdom commemoration and to establish potential interventions.

1.1.4 Objectives

1. To trace the theological and historical roots of religious syncretism
2. To identify the elements of syncretism in the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations.

3. To establish ways in which syncretism in the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations may be effectively addressed

1.1.5 Research questions

1. What are the theological and historical roots of religious syncretism?
2. What aspects in the Namugongo Martyrdom Commemorations are syncretic?
3. How may the said syncretic aspects in the Namugongo Martyrdom commemorations be effectively addressed?

1.1.6 Scope of the study

This part shows the parameters of the study undertaken in terms of its content, geographical setting and time boundaries.

1.1.6.1 Time scope

The study focused on Uganda Martyrs commemoration events at the Anglican and Catholic sites in Namugongo from 2008 to date.

1.1.6.2 Geographical scope

The Namugongo martyrs' sites are located in Kira Municipality, Wakiso District, in Central Uganda approximately 15 kilometers (9.3 miles), by road, northeast of Kampala City.

1.1.6.3 Content scope

This study focused on the annual martyrdom commemoration events held at the Namugongo Martyrs' Sites in Uganda. The study analyzed on-scene observations of the martyrdom commemoration proceedings, gathered opinions of various scholars, clergy, pilgrims, and martyrdom site stakeholders.

The study weighed the martyrdom commemoration worship practice against scripture, reason and church tradition with the aim of discerning potential deviations.

The study also sought to establish effective means of realigning and preserving the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations within the bounds of authentic scriptural Christianity.

1.1.7 Justification

Identifying and addressing syncretic aspects in the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations is critical for ensuring theological integrity before, at and after the

Uganda Martyrs' commemoration event. There is always theological confusion in the Namugongo Martyrdom commemorations whenever pilgrims from all walks of life convene at the shrines from year to year, and this needed to be addressed. This study set out to establish checks for ensuring that the faith once delivered to the saints is uncompromisingly preserved unadulterated for future generations even in the course of the commemorations.

1.1.8 Significance

1. The findings of the study aids Church leaders in addressing syncretism and the development of a defined martyrdom theology for the church of Uganda.
2. The study contributes to doctrinal clarity and integrity within the Church of Uganda.
3. The findings of the study informs contemporary pastoral practice and equipping clergy in the work of guiding and enlightening their congregants (potential pilgrims) on scripturally sound martyrdom theology.
4. The study aids church scholars undertaking further studies in the areas of syncretism and martyrdom.

1.1.9 Theoretical framework

The study explored different works in historical theology, compared biblical texts, and assessed the prevailing martyrdom commemoration practices on ground. Scriptural analysis and comparison provided theological insights into what amounts to syncretism, God's stand on the subject and the theology of martyrdom.

Historical theological texts were consulted to trace the roots of martyrdom theology in the church and to appreciate its interaction with various cultural practices.

Systematic theology facilitated the systematic examination of theological concepts related to martyrdom, syncretism, and idolatry, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the issues dealt with at hand.

1. 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section contains a variety of literature pertaining syncretism, which the researcher reviewed.

1.2.1 Historical Christian perspectives on martyrdom

According to Ezenweke's *Perspectives of Syncretism and its Modern Trend: A case study of Christian and African Traditions*, traces the English word 'syncretism' from the Greek word *synkretismos*. It is, in secular terms, the combination of two or more things that

are concerned with human life and activities in order to give it a new look and be more sophisticated from its initial state (Ezenweke, 2015).

Richard Wurmbrand in his book *'Tortured for Christ'* gives a history of the underground Church under Communist Russia, where Christians met in caves, basements and prison for fear of persecution (Wurmbrand, 1967). His body bears the scars of fourteen years of torture and suffering in a communist prison. He writes as a person who witnessed the indomitable courage and continuing faith of hundreds upon hundreds of Christian believers in an atheistic state torn from their loved ones, battered and beaten in body but not in spirit.

Richard's work provides us a victim's account of a martyrdom that almost became and his narrative sounds like the voice of a resurrected Uganda martyr recounting his gruesome experience at Namugongo, and can be useful to this study for purposes of appreciating well the realities of martyrdom executions by rulers and men enraged against Christianity. However, "Tortured for Christ" being a practical narrative does not appear to address much of the theology of martyrdom, let alone martyrdom commemorations, an area this research is bent towards. The work explores the value of suffering for the name of Christ, but does not look into the aftermath, that is, how the people respond to the tragedy of those who give up their lives because of their faith.

Lwanga's *History of Martyrdom in Uganda*, provides a historical perspective on the martyrdom in Uganda, shedding light on the significance of these events in shaping the Christian faith in the region (Lwanga, 2005). Kaggwa's *Religious Syncretism in Uganda* examines the phenomenon of religious syncretism in Uganda, offering insights into the blending of traditional beliefs with Christianity (Kaggwa, 2010).

John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* recounts the lives, suffering and triumphant deaths of Christian martyrs through our history. From Jesus Christ, the first martyr Foxe traces the roots of persecution focusing on the lives of great men such as John Wycliffe, John Huss, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, Thomas Cranmer and many others (Foxe, 1554). Seeing that he also knew persecution, his writing possesses a sense of immediacy and insight into suffering that few objective Church historians can match.

Besides the number of martyrdom accounts where some of those ancient holy and good men of our faith were put to death on trumped up charges of heresy and rebellion yet standing for truth, Foxe does not handle any heresies surrounding martyrdom commemorations, an area which this study is aimed at. It is vividly clear that heresy in martyrdom commemorations is a subject which not many ancient church authors ventured upon. Secondly, John Foxe approaches the subject of martyrdom from a

Mediaeval and classical Christian point of view as opposed to the instant study which looked at martyrdom in the East African context of our contemporary times.

Foxe's work answers the question as to whether or not the martyrdom of saints is a new phenomenon. He mines out the long history of persecution of Christians, and the contribution it added to the growth, expansion and strengthening of Christendom, but does not capture the post martyrdom situation, how men react to the heroic deaths of the righteous, and the impacts of the same upon the church's belief system.

Brian M Litfin's *Early Christian Martyr Stories* gives an authoritative introduction to the theology of the early Christians, by presenting to us their lives and heroic deaths. He narrates how their witness was inspired by faith in Christ's glorious resurrection and their hope for the coming fullness of his kingdom and gives many martyrdom narratives starting from the Maccabees in the reign of Antiochus Epiphanus, Peter, Paul, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, St. Justin, Chariton, Charito, Eulpistos, Hierax, Liberian, and their defenses before authorities; the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne, the Scillitan martyrs, whom he says were the first Christian blood to be shed on the African continent plus their interrogation, Perpetua and Felicity, those two heroines of the faith. Most interesting of all is that part where he presents a Tertullian's theology of martyrdom in his challenge to the blood thirsty magistrates of his day, thus,

"All right then, get on with it, good judges! The people will view you all the better if you sacrifice the Christians to them. Crucify us! Torture us! Condemn us! Eliminate us! Your unjust opposition only highlights our innocence- which is exactly why God allows us to suffer these things.....yet nothing is accomplished by your cruelties, even when each is more heinous than the last. Instead, they serve as an enticement to our religion. Indeed, we supply a greater yield wheever you cut us down. The blood of Christians is seed!" (Litfin, 2014).

Litfin also captures Origen's encouragement for martyrs, his stern caution against idol worship and an address on the error of worshiping creatures, wherein he tackles the jealousy of God, and the treatise on the consequences of apostasy and the Christian requirement of self-denial. All these are integral aspects of martyrdom theology.

Litfin also analyses the great persecutions from the time of the Emperor Diocletian to the peace of Constantine. However, his main focus is on the early church, and he leaves aspects of posthumous commemoration of martyrs and the heresies therein emerging largely unattended to, hence this study.

Babirye's *"Historical Perspectives on Martyrdom Memorials"* presents historical perspectives on martyrdom memorials in Uganda, shedding light on the evolution of these practices over time (Babirye, 2015).

1.2.2 Martyrdoms of the Roman inquisition

Henry Charles Lea, in his book *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages* records the massive persecutions carried out by the Roman Catholic church against her own children. Under the orders of the inquisition, a judicial procedure and later an institution was established by the papacy and implemented by secular governments in the effort to combat what Rome deemed as heresy.

Lea's book estimates that over 50 million Christians were killed under this pontifical Order, being accused of heresy. Others, their bones were exhumed and burned under the orders and supervision of Roman Catholic Bishops. Lea looks at condemnations of the everlasting gospel, dissensions in the Franciscan order, compromise of Spirituals, the Bull *exit qui seminat*, persecution of Italian Spirituals, bloody persecution of the Olivists, persecution of the Gugliemites, the fate of the Sectaries, the burning of Gerardo Segaelli in 1300, persecution of Franciscans, Waldenses and other important facts in the history of martyrdom (Lea, 1955).

Lea's work is highly insightful on the substance of martyrdom, but only covers events of ancient times, focuses only on martyrdoms accruing from Roman suspicions of heresy, not on heresies arising in the aftermath of martyrdom.

France Quere, and Jean Claude Thomas, in their book *The Book of Christian Martyrs* provides precious insights into the diversity of martyrdom, its meanings, with vivid instances from antiquity, classical period and the present day, the unity of martyrdom, and also explores the connection between martyrdom and communion with Christ. One of the chapters explores the martyrdoms of key personalities in the church like Polycarp, Perpetua and Felicitas, Joan of Arc (1412-1431), Jan Huss (1370-1415), Thomas More (1477-1535), Damian the Blind, Paul Ni of Korea, Martyrs of Madagascar, Isaac Marie of the incarnation and seven other Martyrs, Archbishop Vladimir, Maximilian Kolbe, Marie Skobtsova, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr, Alice Domon, the Uganda Martyrs and Archbishop Janani Luwum (Quere, 1990).

Bringing together all the aforementioned martyrdom accounts ancient and modern, Lea covers martyrdoms from various cultural contexts and churches. Most profitable of all is his treatment of Archbishop Janani Luwum, and the Uganda martyrs, who are the main subject of this study.

Lea narrates how the White Fathers on the invitation of Kabaka Mutesa 1 in Uganda, ransomed many slave children, and opened up orphanages, hoping to make it a nucleus of future Christianity. He goes on to narrate how persecution broke out, and the whole plot of events as they unfolded in the killing of the Uganda martyrs.

However, Lea does not address how the contemporary Christians in Uganda have theologically perceived the death of the martyrs, plus the worship practice at the annual Uganda martyr's commemoration.

Donald Attwater, in his book, *"Martyrs: from Stephen to John Tung"* also narrates several martyrdoms, from the Biblical saint Stephen to John Tung Chi Shih, a priest in the Chinese province of Yunnan who paid a penalty for his faithfulness. Donald also narrates the death of Blandina, Justin, St. Procopius, Sabbas the Goth, Martyrs under the Vandals, St. Martin, Stephen the younger, Thomas of Canterbury, the martyrs of Damascus, a few among many. Just like other works already surveyed, Donald's work focuses on the events as they occurred but not on the post martyrdom impacts on the belief system of the succeeding church, the major concern of the present study (Attwater, 1958).

Walter Bauer, in his book, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* assesses the general history of heresies from the times of Alexander the Great to Eusebius (Bauer, 1972). He looks at heresies like the Abgar legend, the Edessene Chronicle, Marcion, Bardesanes, Mani, and their Literature of the Diatessaron and Pauline Epistles. He looks at the earliest period of Egyptian Christianity, battles of famous church fathers against heresies, for instance Ignatius of Antioch and the Mon episcopate, Polycarp of Smyrna and Philippi Thessalonica and Crete.

Bauer surveys the characteristics of heresy and syncretism and operating procedures like confrontation focusing on the Montanist controversy as an example. Much as Bauer's work seems to focus on church events in former ages, it resonates with the present study especially on the discernment of emerging syncretism

1.2.3 Perspectives on Syncretism

Syncretism, a concept widely discussed in contemporary religious studies, refers to the merging or assimilation of different religious beliefs and practices. It often arises when differing religions come into contact, and a blending of elements from each tradition takes place.

The term *syncretism* has gained negative connotations in modern ecumenical movements, particularly in the International Missionary Council (IMC) meeting in Tambaram, South India, in 1938. The International Missionary Council together with theologians such as H. Kraemer, viewed syncretism as an illegitimate mingling of different religious elements. Kraemer's work, *Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, emphasizes that this indiscriminate mixture of Christian revelation with elements from other religions is unacceptable (Lossky, 1991). He argues that such

amalgamation risks undermining the uniqueness of the Christian revelation in Jesus Christ and compromises the integrity of the faith.

R.J. Zwi Wroblewski's *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, describes syncretism as the blending or reconciling of heterogeneous elements, often leading to a mixture of beliefs and practices from different origins. Wroblewski notes that syncretism can be found in historical instances such as the amalgamation of Israelite and Canaanite religions, which the biblical prophets consistently opposed (Wroblewski, 1997). An instance of religious syncretism is Hinduism which allows new deities to be introduced into a pantheon. The Hindus have a myriad of gods and adding to them a few more can only enhance their worship system. In Hinduism, the more gods, the better. They can easily accept Christ as another among their multitude of gods.

Another instance of such religion is Baha'i which begun in 19th century Persia declaring that all religions teach the same truth and that Baha'u'llah, was but the latest in an ever-continuing series of revelations from God. In Baha'i, there is room for the teachings of all religions, since all are believed to be "one". Baha'is believe that God sent a series of prophets to teach eternal moral truths and to reveal new social principles suited to the times. Their prophets include Abraham and Moses; Jesus Christ and Muhammad. Baha'u'llah declared that all religions honor the same God, and that the highest form of worship is service to other human beings. He also taught that God wants all people to form a united society based on mutual acceptance of one another.

Another instance of religious syncretism is the contemporary Latin America's cult of the Virgin of Guadeloupe, Mexico, Mexico City and a church is built over the site where Mary is said to have appeared in 1531, and thousands of Catholics make pilgrimages there every year. But whom are they holding in such reverence? Mary or some Aztec goddess? Historians believe that reverence is indirectly paid to an Aztec goddess, Tonantzin who is believed to have stood on the site before it was destroyed by some local Catholic bishop. That goddess was known by the same title Catholics use for Mary, "*Our Holy Mother*" and was much associated with the moon. The Virgin of Guadeloupe is pictured standing there on a crescent moon and is shown without baby Jesus. In many Latin societies the ever-present virgin eclipses Christ even as she veils the Father.

The negative view of syncretism is further shown by William Hocking, who asserts that any approach failing to mark a radical break with one's religious past upon deciding for Christ is syncretistic and denies biblical realism. This perspective emphasizes the importance of maintaining a distinct and pure Christian identity, free from the influences of other religious traditions (Galatians 1:13-14).

The literature on syncretism above reviewed provides a framework for understanding the concerns raised about the blending of Christian worship practices with elements

that may be considered heretical or idolatrous especially at Namugongo, in the annual commemorations of the Uganda Martyrs.

The historical and theological insights from these sources highlight the potential dangers of syncretism, reinforcing the need for a critical examination of the worship practices at Namugongo to ensure they align with biblical principles and uphold the integrity of the Christian faith.

1.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY (QUALITATIVE)

1.3.1 Introduction

The study employed a qualitative research approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. This part lays out the sources of information, area of study, population sample, sampling techniques, procedure for data collection instruments, validity and reliability, strategy for data processing and analysis, research findings and timelines which guided the study to reach at eligible and valid results.

1.3.2 Research design

The researcher appropriated personal observations from the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations, supplemented with field data from select respondents, and other written sources of information. A greater part of the research was library based and a smaller part field based. The work is both analytical, descriptive and comparative because it sought to observe the worship dynamics of pilgrims and clergy at the two martyrdom commemoration sites in Namugongo. The study employed on site visits and documental analysis, consultations and reviews of historical archives of the church, authentic news reportages, peer reviewed theological texts and official church statements with an aim of appreciating the theology of martyrdom commemoration. The researcher then measured the raw worship proceedings and pilgrimage activities observed at the martyrs' sites against the yardstick of scripture, reason and authentic Christian tradition.

1.3.3 Area of study

The study involved collection of data from respondents at the Namugongo Catholic Martyrs Shrines and Namugongo Anglican Martyrs site, the central areas of study, which are both located in Kira Municipality, Wakiso District, in Central Uganda approximately 15 kilometers (9.3 miles), by road, northeast of Kampala City. Scholarly respondents interviewed were from the Uganda Christian University, Mukono and pastoral respondents from surrounding Churches within the Mukono, Wakiso Kampala District area.

1.3.4 Sources of Information

The study relied on primary and secondary sources of information. Primary information was obtained from the Archives section of Uganda Christian University. Secondary information was obtained from peer reviewed books and papers in the Hamu Mukasa Library, Bishop Tucker Library, National Library of Uganda, Uganda Martyrs Museums, Namirembe Diocesan secretariat and Namirembe Resource Centre, interviews with clergy, Namugongo pilgrims, Internet sites, martyrdom site observations, newspaper articles and others.

1.3.5 Study population

The study targeted approximately 120 individuals, among them, Church scholars, lay church elders, Staff at Namugongo Martyrs Museum, and other select staff at the Catholic and Anglican martyrs' sites, pilgrims and neighboring residents. The study took interest in the listed categories of persons because of their direct involvement or experiential knowledge of the subject under investigation, at a participant, administrative or scholarly level.

1.3.6 Sampling Techniques and procedures

The researcher used purposive sampling focusing on clergy who have participated in the Martyrdom commemorations, senior lay church elders conversant with the subject, Church resource officers, Martyrs Museum staff, Martyrs' sites staff and church scholars. Random sampling was also used in the selection of pilgrims who have been directly participating in the martyrdom commemorations so as to minimize selection bias.

1.3.7 Sample size

The study sampled 38 respondents drawn from the population of 125 following the criteria below.

Respondent category	Total Population	Sample
Participant Pilgrims	50	20
Participating priests	10	3
priests in parishes	10	0
Lay church elders	10	5
Martyrs Museum staff	10	5
Church scholars	10	3
Martyrdom sites neighboring residents	10	2
Martyrdom site keepers	10	0

Namirembe Leaders	Diocese	5	0
Total		125	38

1.3.8 Protocols for data collection

The researcher obtained an introductory letter and permission from Bishop Tucker School of Divinity and Theology of the Uganda Christianity Mukono, to carry out data collection in the field. Ahead of the date of data collection, the researcher then booked appointments with the relevant persons and departments whom he intended to interview.

1.3.9 Data collection instruments

This part contains systematic approaches which the researcher employed in gathering and recording relevant information for research and analysis purposes.

1.3.9.1 Questionnaire survey

The study employed questionnaires in the collection of quantitative data from the selected pilgrims and other respondents as previously indicated. Structured, close-ended questions were designed to measure the experiences and beliefs of the respondents in the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations and to assess the reasons informing their worship practice.

1.3.9.2 Interview Method

The study also employed the interview method in the collection of qualitative data from the participating clergy, martyrs site keepers, lay church elders, and priests serving in parishes where Namugongo pilgrims hail from. Semi-structured interviews enabled in-depth exploration of their views on the martyrdom commemorations, the syncretic aspects they have observed at Namugongo over the years, and the remedies they propose. During the interviews, the researcher posed questions of importance to the respondents to solicit useful responses and also took sound recordings for accurate compilation and analysis. This method enabled the researcher to capture detailed insights that could not have been obtainable through ordinary questionnaires.

1.3.9.3 Onsite observations

The researcher physically visited the Namugongo Catholic Martyrs Shrine and the Namugongo Anglican martyrs' site, inspected the features thereat, made eye

observations of the ongoing activities, entered the museum, and other important parts of the sites, and took pictures and notes for use in the analysis.

1.3.10 Quality control for validity and reliability

The researcher employed rigorous data collection, verification, and analysis protocols to minimize errors.

1.3.10.1 Validity

To ensure the validity of the instruments, the questionnaire and interview guide was reviewed by the supervisor whose feedback guided and refined them to ensure that they were accurately framed to solicit the relevant information needed.

1.3.10.2 Reliability

Reliability was tested through a pilot study with 10 pilgrims from different regions of the country. Using this test-retest method, the consistency of responses was measured, with discrepancies addressed before full-scale data collection.

1.3.11 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines throughout the data collection, analysis, compilation and presentation process. The researcher first obtained a certificate of approval to undertake field studies from the Research Ethical Committee of the National Council for Higher Education, obtaining informal consent from all participants in the data collection exercise, ensuring confidentiality and avoiding all forms of coercion of respondents. The study was carried out with honesty, transparency and respect for all participants' rights. Special consideration was given to respondents with special needs, while also ensuring voluntary participation and prioritizing their well-being at all stages of the research process.

1.3.12 Data analysis, presentation and interpretation of findings

The researcher analyzed and presented the collected data in a systematic manner aligned with the three research questions.

For the first question, which sought the historical and theological meaning of religious syncretism, the researcher conducted an extensive review of peer-reviewed sources, prioritizing early and foundational works. Biblical passages, theological texts, and credible sermon materials were thoroughly examined to develop a clear theological framework and paradigm for identifying syncretism. The key elements and ingredients of syncretism were established as a standard “yardstick” against which practices at the

Namugongo martyrdom commemorations would be measured. Factors that give rise to or promote syncretism were also analyzed and presented.

In addressing the second research question – identifying elements of syncretism in the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations – the researcher triangulated data from multiple sources: on-site observations, photographs of the proceedings, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. All findings were carefully sieved and evaluated against the theological framework developed in the first section to determine which practices exhibited syncretic characteristics.

For the third question, which focused on how syncretism can be addressed, the researcher examined the effects of the identified syncretic practices on the faith and spiritual life of the Church of Uganda. This involved analyzing pilgrims' narratives regarding their beliefs about the martyrs, perceived spiritual benefits, and the meaning they attached to the event. These views were weighed against Scripture, reason, and authentic Christian tradition. The study further compared the “in-camp” lifestyle and spirituality of pilgrims during the commemorations with their everyday Christian life, highlighting both short-term and long-term impacts. Potential indicators of syncretic apostasy were identified, along with observable differences in the spiritual condition of frequent participants versus those who abstain.

Finally, the researcher proposed practical recommendations and strategies for addressing the syncretic manifestations in the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations, drawing comparisons between the findings of the first two questions to suggest biblically grounded and pastorally relevant solutions.

1.3.13 Limitations of the Study

1. The study encountered several limitations during data collection. Gaining access to elderly pilgrims was difficult due to time and distance constraints, language barriers, and their reluctance to be interviewed.
2. Accessing high-ranking church leaders, site administrators, and scholars required multiple permissions, causing significant delays, with some respondents ultimately not interviewed.
3. Additionally, the timing of the research did not coincide with the June 2026 pilgrimage, limiting direct onsite observations and respondent access. The researcher compensated by using pictures, videos, and data from the June 2025 pilgrimage in which he actively participated.

1.3.14 Delimitations of the study

The study benefited from several delimitations that enhanced its feasibility.

4. The researcher leveraged the assistance of pastors to gain access to elderly participants in the martyrdom commemorations, as they enjoyed high trust and facilitated open and honest responses.
5. Most targeted stakeholders were conveniently located within the central Ugandan districts of Wakiso, Kampala, and Mukono, making access easier.
6. Timely appointment booking, follow-up calls, and guidance from the supervisor further improved response rates.
7. Access to prominent church scholars was simplified by the researcher's location at Uganda Christian University, Mukono.
8. Additionally, the researcher's active participation in the June 2025 pilgrimage provided valuable firsthand data, which was supplemented with field interviews to compensate for the inability to observe the 2026 event.

These factors kept the study focused and manageable.

1.3.15 Arrangement of chapters

The chapters of the research are arranged in the following order;

Chapter 1-	General Introduction, literature review and Methodology
Chapter 2-	Theological and historical roots of religious syncretism
Chapter 3-	Presentation of findings on syncretism in the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations
Chapter 4-	Analysis and discussion of findings
Chapter 5-	Conclusion and recommendations

1.3.16 Timing of the study

The researcher carried out interviews within a time frame of two months, gave out and collected questionnaires within another period of two months, analyzed and compiled data within one month, then bound and submitted the final report for assessment. In general, the study was accomplished within a time frame of seven months from September 2025, April 2026.

CHAPTER TWO: THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive theological and doctrinal yardstick for defining what amounts to syncretism. It draws extensively on etymological origins, all key biblical passages (Old and New Testaments), prophetic condemnations, detailed examples of idolatrous blending, definitions and categories of idols, patristic writings (including Basil the Great, Epiphanius of Salamis, Augustine, Lactantius, Cyril of Alexandria, and others), church councils (Elvira, Hieria 754, Nicaea II 787), historical development of icons and martyrdom commemorations, Reformation and Puritan critiques, and factors fuelling syncretism..

The yardstick emphasizes that true Christian worship demands radical separation of the sacred from the profane, exclusive devotion to Yahweh/Christ, and rejection of any accommodation that shares glory due to God alone with created things, images, saints, or cultural spirits. Syncretism is not neutral contextualization but spiritual adultery that provokes divine judgment, as repeatedly demonstrated in Scripture and church history.

2.2 Roots of Syncretism

Ezenweke views syncretism as the practice of different religions at the same time. The word *syncretismos* derives from the custom of the ancient people of the Island of Crete, who always fought amongst themselves but combined forces to combat external invasions. They named this practice *synkretimos*, from a verb meaning *to combine* (Ezenweke & Kanu, 2012).

In Christian context, syncretism occurs when basic elements of the Christian gospel are replaced by religious elements from host cultures and surrounding worship systems. It emerges from the tendency to undermine the uniqueness of the gospel as laid down in the Scriptures. Syncretism arises mostly in situations where there are attempts to contextualize Christianity within its host cultures. When syncretism begins to break in, the worship due to one God begins to be shared with competing deities or other objects of human design.

Another form appears when Christianity is planted where an existing religion already thrives, resulting in mixed beliefs and practices. When the gospel came to Africa, people embraced Christianity in large numbers but the majority refused to detach themselves from their indigenous religious way of life and cultural practices. Richard Magoola posits that African Christianity is a mixture of African Traditional Religion practices and Christian tradition (Arinaitwe, 2023). Missionaries planted Christianity, yet some Christians in Africa still observe their African spiritualism and rituals while practicing Christianity. This blending also occurs within denominational lines, where Anglicans gradually begin to act like Catholics and pick elements from neo-Pentecostals.

The oscillation between protecting the redeeming gospel of Christ (with its superiority) and engaging astringent African traditions creates hybrid forms that dilute monotheistic fidelity.

2.3 Factors that fuel Religious Syncretism

Geographical, economic, and linguistic factors in cosmopolitan cities and business nerve centers breed syncretism. Takore (2024) gives the clear example of the city of Alexandria, where many people gathered for commercial purposes and over time, Greek Hellenism mingled with Egyptian culture and Judeo-Christianity.

The policy of religious tolerance can be another cause. Gathoni (2015), in her paper *Innovative Christian Strategies for Confronting Syncretic Practices*, explains that when a religious tolerance policy is introduced, syncretism appears as a means of plugging gaps between religions. Politicians and religious leaders often promote tolerance for temporary or “plastic” peace among unruly and parallel religions.

Christian innovations without replacement functions for pre-existing traditional values are an open door to syncretism. When the gospel displaces existing worship practices without providing replacements—especially in Africa—phenomena like the African Independent Church Movements arise. These churches meet people’s traditional needs for spontaneous prayer, exorcism, and faith healing that may be lacking in mainstream churches, but liable of syncretism.

The relentless search for healings and quick divine intervention fosters syncretism. Individuals seeking spiritual satisfaction turn to religions offering rapid responses, leading to mixing with negative effects when exaggerated.

Cultural value and ethnicity factors also breed syncretism. Most people resist losing their cultural identity and thus mix faith with cultural life. An instance is during church burial arrangements, varying ATR sentences are observed in send-off exercises across various communities, a pattern that cuts across cultures worldwide—for example, Christian sects in Korea are now almost unrecognizably Christian due to profound syncretic effects of Buddhism and native Korean belief systems.

Christian missions in Africa find themselves oscillating between protecting the redeeming gospel of Christ with its superiority tendency and engaging African traditions, often in contrast. Thus, African Christianity is characterized by syncretism whereby African and Western theologies mix to the point that both systems seem to lose their basic structures and identities (Ezenweke, 2015; Ezenweke & Kanu, 2012).

The source contrasts this with the early Hebrews, who, upon discovering God’s transcendence, immediately began separating the sacred from the profane as instructed:

“And they shall teach my people the difference between the holy and profane, and cause them to discern between the clean and the unclean” (Ezekiel 44:23, ESV).

Another key element is that the dominant culture or religion usually prevails in the exchange. Upon entry into Canaan, Israel assumed much of the indigenous religion and absorbed it. This is inevitable whenever a simpler culture encounters more sophisticated environments.

2.4 Idolatrous Syncretism

The interplay between idolatry and syncretism is profound, particularly within the Christian church. Syncretism often begins with idolatrous impulses, incorporating elements from other religions or worldviews under the guise of worshiping the true God. This compromises faith purity and invites divine judgment, as seen throughout scriptural and historical narratives.

Whereas syncretism is the blending of different religious beliefs, practices, or traditions into a new hybrid form—frequently resulting in dilution or alteration of core doctrines through intentional cultural accommodation or subtle assimilation—idolatry refers to the worship of false gods or elevation of created things above the Creator. In the Bible, it is condemned as a direct violation of God’s sovereignty, often manifesting as physical images or misplaced heart devotion.

Idolatry is a high ingredient and indeed, a foundational catalyst—of religious syncretism in the church. By examining biblical examples, historical precedents, theological arguments, and modern manifestations, we will henceforth explore how idolatry facilitates merging incompatible beliefs, leading to a corrupted Christianity that strays from monotheistic roots.

Biblically, idolatry is not limited to graven images but also encompasses any substitution for God, such as greed or immorality, which Paul categorizes as spiritual idolatry in Colossians 3:5. Syncretism encompasses this when such elements mix with Christian practices.

The Holy Bible contains a comprehensive framework for understanding idolatry as the engine of syncretism. From the outset, the Decalogue prohibits it:

“You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image” (Exodus 20:3-4, ESV).

This asserts God’s uniqueness and intolerance for competitors; idolatry is an offense against His character, assuming God can be represented or supplemented by created things.

2.5 Syncretism in religious Iconography

Christian iconography is considered syncretic, as it developed by adapting existing artistic, symbolic, and cultural elements from Roman, Greek, Jewish, and other regional traditions into a new Christian theological framework. While Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism developed a distinct theology of the icon, the visual language used to express it was often adopted from pre-existing pagan and secular, Mediterranean imagery

Everett Ferguson notes that painted Christian icons descended from Greek Hellenistic and Roman portraits of gods, emperors, officials, writers, philosophers, or ancestors in private homes. Veneration could have evolved from pre-Christian practices surviving into Christian times. The cult of ruler portraits involved propitiatory sacrifices, burning candles and incense, prayers, and apotropaic supplications. Tapers, incense burners, curtains, flowers, and prayers were placed before icons. By AD 400, Christians attributed magical efficacy to images, placing them as protective devices at church entrances, gateways, and workshops. By the 6th century, genuflection (*proskynesis*), bowing, kissing, processions, and use as palladia in battle became common, mirroring imperial image cults. Images were carried during church rebuilding or for protection during times of pestilence like the Black Death. A cult of images, partly from relics, intensified in the 6th-7th centuries and was officially promoted. Early icons included carved ones and *acheiropoietai* (not made by human hands), such as the legendary image of Christ at Edessa.



Russian devotees process penitentially with sacred icons, praying and singing in massive Catholic ritual gatherings. (Anna Popova, 2025)



Major Russian Velikoretskoe pilgrimage honors St Nicholas, drawing 30,000 participants. (Vladimir Rozanskij, 2017)

Christian writers opposed icons as idolatrous syncretism. Nicolas Lossky notes severe attacks during the Iconoclastic movement of the 8th and 9th centuries. In the 20th century, traditional art resumed, with icons becoming common in Roman Catholic, Anglican, and ecumenical settings, defined by the Seventh Ecumenical Council as “*theology in color*” (Lossky, 2002).

2.6 Ways People Erect Idols

There are three primary ways idols are erected;

(a) False Opinions on God as Idolatrous Syncretism

When people conceive God differently from His self-revelation in Scripture, they erect an idol—a fiction of their human brain. Joshua commanded the Israelites thus,

“Put away the strange gods which are among you” (Joshua 24:23).

Augustine expounded that Joshua saw unfit thoughts of God in their hearts. Examples include conceiving God outside the Trinity (e.g., Ephesians 2:12; Galatians 4:8; 1 John 2:23) or forging Christ by stripping His offices (prophet, priest, king).

The Council of Trent’s views on transubstantiation, human satisfaction, merit of works, venial sin, intercession of saints, and redemptive suffering degrade Christ of his priesthood.



An instance of human satisfaction is the present-day Good Friday live crucifixions (above) in Pampanga, Philippines, wherein practitioners trust that they are making reparation for their sins through extreme physical sacrifice. Devotees engage in this self-flagellation, as an act of penance to merit them a divine forgiveness for their sins. Long painful walks to pilgrimage sites in hope to earn God's forgiveness are also undertaken in this same spirit.

Article 31 of the 39 Articles of Religion challenges the doctrine of human satisfaction. It speaks of the one oblation of Christ finished upon the Cross thus;

“The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone...”

The above article strongly rejects any idea that humans can offer their own satisfaction for sin (through works, penances, pilgrimages, indulgences, etc.). It asserts that Christ's single sacrifice on the cross is the only sufficient satisfaction for sin. Any attempt by humans to add their own satisfaction is unnecessary and undermines the completeness of Christ's work.

(b) Invention of Strange Means of Worship

Worshiping God by means not appointed in His Word sets up a devised god. Augustine noted Gentiles refused the God of the Hebrews because His will was exclusive worship. Samaritans worshiped the true God wrongly:

“Ye worship ye know not what” (John 4:22).

Monotheism negates idol worship (Exodus 20:3-5). Hosea 2:16-17, a prophecy about the relationship between the Lord and his church in the dispensation of the grace,

“In that day,” declares the Lord, “you will call me ‘my husband’;

you will no longer call me ‘my master. I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked

Jeremiah 2:23 exposes the people's evasive denials of charges of defilement while they were busy going after Baalim.

"How can you say, 'I am not defiled; I have not run after the Baals'?"

See how you behaved in the valley; consider what you have done.

You are a swift she-camel running here and there, Jeremiah 2:23

Matthew 15:9 condemns vain worship that teaches human commandments as doctrines of God. Any worship through images, veneration of the dead, or holy water devises a god according to human pleasure, not Scripture. Moses testified against images representing the true God because Israel saw no similitude at Horeb (Deuteronomy 4:15-16). Strabo the Geographer affirmed Jews as true worshipers without images in all nation because they do not worship images.

2.7 Specific Old Testament cases of idolatrous syncretism

1. The Golden Calf (Exodus 32; Deuteronomy 9-10)

The first major example is the incident of the Golden Calf at Mount Sinai. While Moses was on the mountain receiving the Law, the Israelites pressured Aaron to make a molten calf. They then declared a feast "to the Lord" before the image. This act represented a classic case of syncretism – attempting to worship Yahweh through a prohibited physical image. God responded with severe judgment, highlighting His strong displeasure with covenant-breaking idolatry.

2. Micah's Idols (Judges 17)

Another clear case is found in the story of Micah from the hill country of Ephraim who created a private shrine using 200 shekels of silver (originally dedicated to God) to make a carved image and a cast idol. He also made an ephod and teraphim (household gods), and consecrated one of his sons as priest. Later, he hired a Levite (a priest ordained by God) to serve in this shrine. Micah confidently declared,

*"Now I know that the LORD will do me good, seeing I have a Levite as my priest."
(Judges 17:13)*

Despite his sincere belief that he was worshipping the true God, Micah's actions constituted syncretic and condemned worship. The text notes the chaotic spiritual condition of the time:

"In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes." (Judges 17:6)

3. Jeroboam's Golden Calves at Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12; 2 Kings 10:28-29)

King Jeroboam of the Northern Kingdom erected two golden calves, one in Bethel and one in Dan, to prevent the people from going to Jerusalem to worship. Although presented as representations of the God who brought Israel out of Egypt, these calves became central objects of idolatrous syncretism. Even the zealous reformer King Jehu, who destroyed Baal worship, refused to remove Jeroboam's calves. The Bible records:

"Howbeit from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, Jehu departed not from after them, to wit, the golden calves that were in Bethel, and that were in Dan." (2 Kings 10:28-29)

Jehu's motive was supposedly to worship the Lord, yet his failure to destroy the calves made him complicit in idolatry. This shows that good intentions do not justify breaking God's explicit command.

Prophetic Condemnation and the Psalms

The Psalmist repeatedly pronounces curses on idolaters and those who trust in images:

"Confounded be all they that worship carved images... that delight or glory in them." (Psalm 97:7)

"Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not... They that make them are like unto them; so is everyone that trusts in them." (Psalm 115:4-8)

In Isaiah 42:8, God declares:

"I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images."

Isaiah 40 - The Incomparable Majesty of God

After powerfully describing God's infinite greatness — measuring the waters in the hollow of His hand, weighing the mountains, and regarding the nations as a drop in a bucket — Isaiah asks rhetorically:

"To whom then will ye liken God? Or what likeness will ye compare unto him?" (Isaiah 40:18)

He mocks the absurdity of craftsmen melting images, overlaying them with gold, and carving immovable idols from wood. The One who sits above the circle of the earth and stretches the heavens like a curtain cannot be adequately represented by human hands.

The Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4-6)

God Himself wrote the prohibition against images with His own finger on the first tablet of the Law:

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me...” (Exodus 20:4-5)

This command was deliberately placed early in the Decalogue to give it priority. God repeated it frequently throughout Scripture (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 5), attaching both severe judgments for disobedience and mercy for obedience, so that it would never be forgotten.

Isaiah 44 exposes the foolishness of idolatry: a man uses part of a tree to cook food and warm himself, then fashions the remaining wood into a god and prays, *“Deliver me; for thou art my god”* (Isaiah 44:17). The prophet calls this spiritual blindness and self-deception.

Ezekiel 6 delivers a terrifying judgment. God promises to destroy high places, break altars and images, and scatter the dead bodies of idolaters before their idols. He declares:

“And ye shall know that I am the LORD.” (Ezekiel 6:7)

Those far away will die by pestilence, those near by the sword, and the besieged by famine, while survivors will be taken captive (Ezekiel 6:12). These warnings were intended to instill holy fear and drive people away from the abomination of idolatry.

From these scriptures, the text draws three major truths about idols:

1. Material inferiority of Idols. They are made from perishable wood, stone, or metal and cannot represent the transcendent majesty of God.
2. Powerlessness of idols. They are dead — unable to see, hear, speak, or move — and therefore unfit to represent the living God.
3. Helplessness of idols. They cannot protect themselves from thieves or fire, let alone save their worshippers.

The text strongly argues that even when people claim good motives (worshipping the true God through images), such practices remain condemned. The Israelites intended to worship Yahweh through the golden calf and Jeroboam's calves, yet God rejected their worship as idolatry. Good intentions cannot override God's revealed will in the Second Commandment.

Finally, the author asserts that although many Old Testament texts were originally addressed to the Jews, they remain fully applicable to Christians today. Since the Lord does not change and Christians are equally God's people, His holy law and His hatred of idolatry continue to bind all His children.

2.8 New Testament Perspectives on Idolatrous syncretism

In the New Testament, Paul teaches that the whole Old Testament was written *“for our learning”* (Romans 15:4), meaning that all Christians are to draw lessons from Israel's history in their faith and practice. He reinforces this in 1 Corinthians 10:5-7, explaining that the children of Israel fell under God's judgment in the wilderness because of disobedience, especially idolatry. These events, he says, *“were for our example, to the intent we should not lust after evil things... neither be ye idolaters.”* The implication is that God's moral law, including the prohibition against idolatry, is unchanging and carries consequences for disobedience.

The New Testament continues this strong rejection of idol worship. Early Church preaching celebrated the transformation of believers turned *“from their dumb and dead images, unto the true and living God.”* In Acts 15:19-20, the apostles instruct Gentile converts to *“abstain from the pollution of idols,”* placing idolatry alongside other serious moral prohibitions. Paul's reaction to Athens, a city *“wholly given to idolatry”* (Acts 17:16), further illustrates the incompatibility between belief in the true God and the use of material representations. The blessed Apostle argues that God cannot be likened to *“gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device,”* and calls all people to repentance (Acts 17:29-30).

The Thessalonians *“turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God”* (1 Thessalonians 1:7-9) and their conversion is presented as a defining mark of genuine faith. Conversely, Paul strongly condemns those who persist in idolatry. In Romans 1:21-23, he describes how people who knew God failed to honor Him and instead *“changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image.”* He says, that the said act led them into spiritual blindness and moral corruption, culminating in God yielding them up to a reprobate mind (Romans 1:24-32).

The seriousness of idolatrous syncretism in the New Testament church is underscored by strict instructions within the Apostolic Christian community. Believers were told not to associate or even eat with anyone who claims to be a Christian but is an idolater (1 Corinthians 5:11). Idolatry is also listed among the *“works of the flesh”* (Galatians 5:20), and those who practice it are warned that they *“shall not inherit the kingdom of God”* (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Paul goes further by stating that sacrifices offered to idols are actually offered *“to devils, and not to God”* (1 Corinthians 10:19-20), making idolatry not merely an error but a toxic and form of spiritual rebellion.

The Apostles John concludes his epistle with the direct exhortation, *“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols”* (1 John 5:21). Paul similarly urges believers to *“flee from idolatry”* (1 Corinthians 10:14). This stresses that one cannot worship both God and idols simultaneously, reflecting the broader biblical principle that *“no one can serve two masters”* (Matthew 6:24). Elijah’s challenge in 1 Kings 18:21, *“If the LORD is God, follow Him. But if Baal is God, follow him”* stands tall enough to show that divided loyalty is unacceptable with Jehovah.

This argument stretches to the nature of the believer as God’s temple in 2 Corinthians 6:16, where Paul asks, *“What agreement hath the temple of God with idols?”* Since Christians themselves are the *“temple of the living God,”* any association with idols is scripturally seen as defiling that sacred identity. This reinforces the idea that there can be no harmony between righteousness and unrighteousness, or between Christ and evil.

A key point addressed is the defense often made by proponents of religious images: that such images are merely aids to worship the true God, not idols in themselves. This distinction does not stand, because intention does not justify practice. The golden calf and Jeroboam’s calves, through which the people claimed to worship the true God were severely condemned. Psalm 106:19-21 describes how Israel *“made a calf... and worshipped the molten image,”* thereby forgetting God. Similarly, Paul’s teaching that idol sacrifices are offered to demons (1 Corinthians 10:20) shows that misguided worship cannot be sanctified by good intentions.

The creation and use of images as representations of God constitutes idolatry, regardless of intent. True worship must align with God’s revealed will, not human invention. Therefore, any form of image-based worship is incompatible with biblical faith and exposes individuals to spiritual danger and divine judgment.

2.9 Idols as Teachers of Lies

Habakkuk asks,

“What profiteth the graven image... a teacher of lies?” (Habakkuk 2:18).

Images mislead by reducing God to corruptible forms (Romans 1:23). God is not bound to images; worship before them becomes devotion to “dumb idols” or devised gods.

2.10 Decking and adornment of Churches

Spiritually, the Church refers to all believers *“sanctified in Christ Jesus”* (1 Corinthians 1:2), united globally as the body of Christ. Paul describes this unity in Ephesians 4:1-6 as of *“one body”* with *“one Spirit... one Lord... one faith... one baptism, and one God and Father of all”* which shows emphasizes that the Church is fundamentally a living community of believers, not a material structure.

In doctrinal terms, the Church is defined by Article 19 of the Thirty-Nine Articles as the place where *“the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered.”* However, when considered as a physical venue, good writers like John Jewell and John Wesley describe it as a place set apart for worship, where believers gather to pray, hear Scripture, and receive God’s grace. As Christ promised, *“where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them”* (Matthew 18:20). Early examples, such as the church in Philemon’s house (Philemon 1:2), show that worship did not depend on elaborate buildings.

The central argument is that the true ornaments of a church are spiritual activities like preaching, prayer, thanksgiving, and sacraments rather than physical adornments. Proper reverence arises from these acts, not from outward ceremonies or costly and glorious decking. Over reliance on visual splendor contradicts Scripture, apostolic practice, and tradition.

Historically, the period before the Reformation witnessed churches filled with images of gold, silver, and ornate decorations and many believed such adornment would inspire reverence by making worship spaces visually impressive. However, this was a corruption of true worship. While wise and understanding people were not spiritually influenced by such displays, they gradually proved harmful to the simple and unwise, who were led into idolatry. Contrary to Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5, these practices encouraged people to treat images as objects of devotion.

The English Reformation came in as a corrective movement that reduced excessive ceremonial practices and decorations in the church. This concern was not merely aesthetic but theological because the introduction statues or images of martyrs into churches, even if intended as reminders to the illiterate, can mislead them into worshiping them, a return to the dangers of former times, when material objects substituted true devotion to God.

The early Church, which is the model of purity for churches of all ages, focused on simple worship centered on God’s Word and sacraments, without reliance on images or elaborate ornamentation.

2.11 Kinds of False Gods

All forms of idolatry, whether directed to pagan deities, exalted humans, or images—are incompatible with true worship of God.

The first kind of false gods are the so-called superior Gentile gods, which were nationally and widely revered among ancient peoples of the world. These include Baal of the Chaldeans and Assyrians, Ashteroth of the Sidonians (Judges 10:6), Molech or Milcom of the Ammonites (1 Kings 11:33), Chemosh of the Moabites, Rimmon of the

Syrians, Dagon of the Philistines, and Remphan or Chiun (Amos 5:25-26; Acts 7:43). These gods were objects of organized worship and were often tied to political or cultural identity.

A key biblical example of these is in 2 Kings 17, where foreign nations resettled in Samaria after Israel's captivity adopted a mixed form of religion. They were said to "*fear the Lord*," yet they simultaneously served their own gods such as Succoth-benoth, Nergal, Ashima, Nibhaz, Tartak, Adrammelech, and Anammelech. The Kings text explains that their "*fear*" of God was merely outward and superficial because "*they feared the Lord, and served their own gods*" (2 Kings 17:33). This contradiction is immediately corrected by Scripture that "*They fear not the Lord... ye shall not fear other gods, nor bow yourselves to them*" (2 Kings 17:34-36). True worship, therefore, demands exclusive devotion to God alone.

There is a parallel between that ancient syncretism and some forms of Christian practice because people may maintain an outward form of worship, attend services or professing faith, while inwardly serve other "*gods*" such as wealth, pleasure, praise, or human traditions. Those are "*works of men's hands*," and the commandment says, "*Thou shalt have no other gods before me*" (Exodus 20:3). Dividing allegiance between God and such idols is a continuation of the same error seen in ancient nations.

The second kind of false gods are the inferior Gentile gods, which were actually deified human beings. In many ancient cultures, particularly among the Assyrians and Romans, kings, heroes, and notable individuals were elevated to divine status. Augustine's *City of God*, notes that the Romans worshipped numerous deities such as Jupiter, Saturn, Mercury, Apollo, Mars... Venus and Vesta, few among many, most whom were originally human figures. Augustine argues that much of pagan religion has reference to dead men, highlighting the human origin of these objects of worship.

The third false god, is the idolatry of man worship, where living individuals are treated with divine honor for instance Haman in Esther 3:1. King Ahasuerus exalted him above all princes, and this honor was beyond civil respect, actually quasi-divine reverence. Mordecai, the pious and wise Jew, refused to bow to Haman as an act of faithfulness because he would not prefer the honor of a man above the glory of God, and would not worship any but his God because he knew that divine honor belongs to God alone.

The Scriptures contain several accounts of many godly individuals who rejected human worship directed towards themselves. Peter refused Cornelius' act of reverence, saying, "*Stand up; I myself also am a man*" (Acts 10:25-26). Similarly, Paul and Barnabas rebuked the people of Lystra who attempted to offer sacrifices to them, insisting, "*We also are men of like passions with you... turn... unto the living God*" (Acts 14:11-15).

Even heavenly beings reject such honor: in Revelation 19:10, a holy angel stopped John from worshiping him, declaring, *“See thou do it not... worship God.”*

In contrast, Satan actively seeks such misplaced worship. When tempting Christ, he offered him worldly power in exchange for worship, but Christ responded, *“You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve”* (Matthew 4:9). This statement is the definitive rule that all worship must be directed exclusively to God.

If biblical figures and even angels refused worship, why should people still continue to prostrate before dead idols and images? In so doing, they dishonor the true God and the practice is high deception inspired by Satan, who seeks to rob God of the honor due him.



Mexican worshippers of Santa Muerte (saint of death) also consider themselves Christian.

The Bible is ripe with countless prohibitions against engaging in occult practices, consulting the dead, or offering sacrifices to idols or false gods.

Leviticus 19:31 God commands his people to give no regard to mediums and familiar spirits and not seek after them to be defiled by them for He, I AM is the Lord their God. In Deuteronomy 18:10-12, the LORD issues an injunction to against those practices thus;

“There shall not be found among you anyone who... practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the Lord...”

“Therefore, my beloved” says Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:14, “*flee from idolatry*” because the veneration of images and deceased saints, is nothing but a mirror of pagan idolatry because it lacks scriptural backing.

2.12 Dangers of idolatrous syncretism

The mixing of true worship of God with the worship of idols is a compromise which leads to many perils, and Scripture lays out many condemnations of idolatrous syncretism.

When God chose Israel as His covenant people, He set them apart from surrounding nations that worshiped idols. In Exodus 19:3-8, He reminded them of His saving power and called them into a covenant relationship, to which they responded,

“All that the LORD has spoken we will do.”

They were made *a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation*, uniquely devoted to Him. Central to this covenant was the command to worship God alone and reject all idols and the Lord repeatedly emphasized it to them in many places because of humanity’s natural tendency toward idolatry which he sought to restrain through clear laws and warnings.

In Deuteronomy 4. Moses urged Israel thus,

“Hearken... unto the statutes... that ye may live, ...Ye shall not add unto the word... neither shall ye diminish ought from it” (Deuteronomy 4:1-2).

Moses urged told the people to guard their hearts carefully and teach God’s commandments to future generations (v.9). Crucially, he reminds them that although they heard God’s voice at Horeb, they “*saw no form*,” and therefore must not make “*any graven image*” or likeness of anything in creation (verse12, 15-19), an absolute prohibition to the effect that no representation of God or created thing is to be worshiped.

The warning intensified in verses 23-24, thus,

“Take heed... lest you... make you a graven image... for the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 4:23-24).

If Israel disobeyed, they would quickly perish, be scattered among nations, and serve lifeless gods of wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell (verse 25-28).

From this injunction, we deduce that idolatry is a direct breach of God’s covenant, explicitly forbidden and rooted in rebellion against His holiness. It provokes His jealousy and wrath, deceives its practitioners, and must be actively opposed by God’s people

across generations. Moreover, it brings tangible consequences like short life, national disaster, exile, and subjugation.

Despite these warnings, Israel repeatedly fell into syncretism, blending worship of Yahweh with pagan practices. As recorded in Kings and Chronicles, a disobedience which brought the very judgments of God as foretold. The Deuteronomy 27:15 curse of, *“Cursed be he that maketh a carved image... an abomination before the Lord,”* was historically included in the liturgy of our church by the reformers, to be declared in all seasons of repentance, to highlight the enduring gravity of idolatry.

The prophet Hosea offers one of the most vivid portrayals of syncretism’s consequences. His life was a symbolic message to Israel because his unfaithful wife, Gomer, represented Israel’s spiritual adultery. The names of his children Jezreel (judgment), Lo-ruhamah (no mercy), and Lo-ammi (not my people)—were an open declaration that God’s patience on Israel had been exhausted and judgment was imminent (Hosea 1:4-9). We deduce therefrom, that idolatry *exhausts God’s mercy and calls down vengeance*. A people once pitied, who had tasted of God’s grace can easily face spiritual abandonment, desolation and destruction when they cling to idols.

Hosea further shows that syncretism breaks the covenant relationship. In Hosea 2:2, God declares of Israel, that *“She is not my wife, neither am I her husband”* (Hosea 2:2), portraying idolatry as spiritual adultery. Israel’s betrayal of the Lord leads her to shame and exposure, when God threatens *“lest I strip her naked... and set her as in the day that she was born”* (Hosea 2:3). The imagery in this prophecy conveys the loss of dignity, protection, and divine favor.

Another danger of idolatrous syncretism is spiritual blindness. Israel was falsely attributing her blessings *“my bread, my water, my wool, my flax”* to the working of her idols rather than to God (Hosea 2:5). This blindness distorts reality, leading people to credit false gods for blessings while blaming God for hardships. As a result, spiritual progress is hindered. God declares in Hosea 2:6, that He will *“hedge up thy way with thorns”* (Hosea 2:6), symbolizing frustration, unanswered prayers, and blocked paths until repentance occurs.

Syncretism also corrupts worship itself. Though Israel continued her routine religious practices in the observance of feasts, Sabbaths, and solemn assemblies, God rejected them:

“I will also cause all her mirth to cease” (Hosea 2:11).

Outward religion without true devotion becomes empty and is ultimately removed. Historically, this was fulfilled when Israel was exiled and deprived of temple worship.

Furthermore, idolatry is the mother of all wickedness. Hosea 4:1-2 lists its effects. When idolatrous syncretism takes central stage, truth disappears, mercy is absent, and crimes such as lying, killing, stealing, and adultery multiply in the land, the entire creation suffers, “*the land mourns... the beasts... birds... and fishes*” decline (Hosea 4:3). Sin spreads beyond individuals to affect society and the environment.

Another consequence of idolatrous syncretism is a hardening of the heart. When people turn to idols, they become stubborn, rejecting correction and contending with God’s true messengers (Hosea 4:4). This pride prevents repentance and deepens their downfall.

Ultimately, syncretism ends in tears of mourning, famine, invasion, and humiliation, and the former blessings cease. Hosea 4:5 warns that both people and leaders “*shall fall*,” showing that idolatry leads to widespread collapse, including religious institutions meant to be light to the nation. This pattern of judgment is consistent throughout Scripture for instance Daniel 5, when King Belshazzar profaned sacred vessels in an idolatrous feast, prompting divine judgment and the word of the Lord came, “*Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting*.” That very night, his kingdom fell (Daniel 5:25-31), a demonstration that God judges both His people and outsiders without partiality.

Idolatrous syncretism unlocks national calamities and distresses. In Hosea 2:6, God “*hedges up*” His people with distress—wars, failures, and hardships—to turn them back to Himself (Hosea 2:6). Alliances with foreign powers and reliance on idols is futile and deliverance will come only when people repent and “*put away strange gods*” (cf. 1 Samuel 7:3; 2 Chronicles 7:14).

Idolatrous syncretism is a grave spiritual danger which breaks covenant with God, provokes His wrath, blinds understanding, corrupts worship, spreads moral decay, and results in judgment and suffering.

2.13 The role of godly rulers in addressing syncretism

From time immemorial, the mixing of true worship with false has always been a serious concern not only for God but also a defining test of godly leadership among His people. Scripture portrays idolatrous syncretism not as a minor deviation, but as spiritual unfaithfulness that provokes divine judgment and demands decisive action from persons entrusted with authority.

Speaking with His friend Moses in Deuteronomy 31:16, God Himself foretold Israel’s tendency toward syncretism, and warned Moses that before his death:

“These people will rise up, and go a whoring after the gods of the strangers... and will forsake me, and break my covenant.”

This prophecy revealed a persistent human inclination to abandon God. Testament to this reality, the Lord enjoined all leaders (shepherds, judges, kings, and magistrates) with the responsibility to guard the people, preserve true worship, and prevent the spread of idolatry. Godly rulers in the Bible were very instrumental in confronting idolatrous syncretism.

The history of Israel demonstrates that faithful leadership always restrained idolatry, but when such good leaders died, the people relapsed. An instance is Judges 2:19 which says:

“When the judge was dead, they returned, and corrupted themselves more than their fathers... they ceased not from their own doings, nor from their stubborn ways.”

This highlights how essential strong, godly leadership was in maintaining spiritual fidelity within the nation.

God’s commands regarding idolatry were not merely prohibitive but also corrective. Not only were idols forbidden, but were also to be actively and tangibly destroyed. Deuteronomy 7:5 commands:

“You shall destroy their altars, break down their images, cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire.”

Similarly, Deuteronomy 12:2-3 instructs Israel to “utterly destroy all the places” of pagan worship and eradicate even the memory of false gods. These commands show that idolatry was to be removed completely, not tolerated or managed.

The seriousness of the issue is further underscored by the Deuteronomy 13 text, wherein even close family members or entire cities promoting idol worship were to be judged without partiality. The text commands,

“If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son, or your daughter, or the wife of your bosom, or your friend, who is like your own soul, entices you secretly, saying, let us go and serve other gods, which you have not known, you, nor your fathers;

Namely, of the gods of the people who are around you, near to you, or far from you, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth;

You shall not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall your eye pity him, neither shall you spare, neither shall you conceal him:

But you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. And you shall stone him with stones, that he dies; because he has sought to draw you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

If you shall hear it said in one of your cities, which the LORD your God has given you to dwell there, that certain men, the children of Belial, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, let us go and serve other gods, which you have not known;

Then you shall enquire, and make search, and ask diligently; and, behold, if it be true, and the thing certain, that such abomination has been committed among you;

You shall surely put to death the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it utterly, and all that is inside there, and the cattle, with the edge of the sword.

And you shall gather all the spoil of it into the midst of the street, and shall burn the city with fire, and all its spoil, for the LORD your God; and it shall be a heap forever; and it shall not be built again.

And there shall cleave no accursed thing to your hand; that the LORD may turn from the fierceness of his anger, and show you mercy, and have compassion upon you, and multiply you, as he has sworn unto your fathers.”

While such severe measures belonged to Israel’s theocratic context, they demonstrate the uncompromising stance God required against syncretism. Importantly, the passage clarifies that such judgments were to be executed by public authorities, not private individuals, in order to prevent commotion and disorder.

Against this backdrop, Scripture evaluates rulers based on how they handled idolatry. Faithful kings who actively removed idols are praised as having done “*right in the sight of the LORD.*”

In 2 Chronicles 14:3, King Asa is commended because,

“he took away the altars of the strange gods... broke down the images, and cut down the groves.”

His reforms brought peace. It says,

“the kingdom was quiet before him.”

Later, strengthened by prophetic encouragements, King Asa *“put away the abominable idols... and renewed the altar of the LORD”* (2 Chronicles 15:8), demonstrating both courage and commitment to restoring true worship in the land.

Similarly, King Hezekiah led his people in a national revival, and under his leadership, they *“broke the images in pieces... threw down the high places and the altars... until they had utterly destroyed them all”* (2 Chronicles 31:1). Halleluiah! This was because of his wholehearted devotion to God. It says that *“he did it with all his heart, and prospered”* (2 Chronicles 31:20-21) and his reign was marked by spiritual renewal and divine favor.

To the contrary, wicked rulers are condemned in the Bible for promoting and tolerating idolatrous syncretism during their tenures. When false prophets, magicians, mediums, witches, enchanter, astrologers, shrines, and houses of idols multiply in the land, God holds priests and rulers culpable. Jeroboam son of Nebat, for instance, is repeatedly denounced for having led Israel into sin by establishing alternative worship with *“molten images.”* God declares through the prophet thus;

“You have gone and made... other gods... to provoke me to anger” (1 Kings 14:9).

The judgment above pronounced against the king was severe because it was going to translate into the utter rejection and destruction of his dynasty. Whether or not the king understood it was immaterial.

“I will... cut off... the house of Jeroboam... till it be all gone” (1 Kings 14:10).

Hearken to this O rulers.

The terrible prophecy above came to fulfillment when Jeroboam’s entire lineage was wiped out in 1 Kings 15:28-30. That notwithstanding, Jeroboam’s idolatrous influence endured long after his death and his successors in crown were continually condemned for continuing *“the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat... who made Israel sin”* (2 Kings 13:10-11). This demonstrates how corrupt leadership leaves a lasting, destructive spiritual, moral, social, political, economic and cultural legacy.

King Ahab is another extreme emblem of failure to heed God’s directives. Scripture states that

“Ahab... did evil... above all that were before him” (1 Kings 16:30).

Ahab not only followed inherited sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but intensified them by marrying Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and served Baal, built altars for idol worship. It is further written that Ahab actions *“provoked the LORD... more than all the kings of Israel”* (1 Kings 16:33).

“But there was none like unto Ahab, who sold himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up” (1 Kings 21:25)

Ahab’s reign illustrates how leadership can actively institutionalize idolatry, leading an entire nation into deeper rebellion.

The true people of God are those among whom no idols are found. Numbers 23:21 declares that

“There is no idol in Jacob... the LORD his God is with him.”

God’s presence and protection are linked to purity of worship. Where idols are removed, God dwells; where they are tolerated, His favor and glory depart.

In 1Samuel 28:5-9, the medium at Endor feared King Saul because she recognized him as the king who had outlawed, expelled, and potentially executed all mediums and necromancers in Israel. She feared backslidden Saul’s coming to consult her as a trap to arrest her and put her to death for practicing the very act he requested. The passage contains another truth, that a ruler who consults mediums, witches, necromancers or worships idols, has no moral or spiritual power to flash them out of the land.

Thus, confronting idolatrous syncretism is a central duty of all godly rulers. Leaders are called not only to teach true worship but also to actively remove false worship. Faithful rulers like Asa and Hezekiah brought renewal, peace, and divine blessing by destroying idols and restoring proper worship. In contrast, unfaithful leaders like Jeroboam and Ahab led their people into sin, incurred God’s wrath, and brought lasting destruction upon their nations.

Idolatrous syncretism is never a private or neutral matter that ought not to be interfered with by the state. It is a national crisis which affects entire communities and political and spiritual leaders bear immense responsibility. Where rulers uphold God’s commands and resist syncretism, the people flourish but where they compromise or promote idolatry, the consequences are dire and far-reaching.

2.14 Church History on Idolatrous Syncretism

Church history provides the clearest record of how idols transitioned from private use to public acceptance and eventual worship within Christian churches and temples. It explains why images were introduced, when they first appeared, who promoted them, and how godly bishops, learned doctors, and faithful Christian rulers and kings actively opposed, resisted, and forbade their use. In this part, we explore key historical insights from ancient writers and historians, showing the gradual infiltration of idolatrous syncretism and the repeated efforts to preserve pure worship.

Early Christians, many of whom had converted from pagan idol worship to faith in the true living God and Saviour Jesus Christ, began painting and carving images of Jesus, His mother Mary, and the apostles. This was often done out of blind zeal or as an act of gratitude and kindness toward those through whom they had received the knowledge of God and the gospel. At this early stage, however, these images remained private and were not brought into churches or worshiped (Eusebius, as cited in the source; Ferguson, 1990).

John Wesley (1745) offers valuable insight into this development. When Christianity first spread, it required little human aid because of the miraculous power of God. The apostles and well-instructed lay believers proclaimed the faith with miracles and unknown tongues. As the gospel took root worldwide, converted kings and rulers built magnificently adorned temples. Zealous and wealthy Christians then introduced pictures into churches – not as mere decorations, but as instructors for the ignorant. These images came to be called *libri laicorum*, or “the books of the people.” Church walls were adorned with gospel scenes so that the illiterate could learn the narrative of Scripture by viewing the pictures. In an age when teachers of reading and writing were scarce, this served a practical educational purpose.

Initially intended for good – to edify and instruct – these visual aids later gave the devil a foothold. As Christian kings and wealthy patrons competed to beautify temples with greater magnificence. Wall paintings evolved into gaudy images placed on altars. People, observing priests bowing and kneeling before these images during services, mistakenly believed the gestures honoured the pictures themselves. What began as admiration for the story depicted gradually turned into adoration of the images. A fatal oversight by the clergy – first neglecting, then winking at, and eventually defending the practice – allowed the shift from instruction to superstition. What started as a tool for teaching the illiterate became poison that infected even the educated and influential, including priests who were won over by the rich and powerful (especially women). Superstition was soon preached from pulpits, and gross idolatry was mistaken for true devotion.

Many godly clergy with sound minds opposed this innovation. They preached and wrote against the worship of images, exposing its wickedness and folly. However, the disease had spread widely, and the poison had taken deep root. Opposition led to division, schisms, and eventually bloodshed. It is astonishing how something so simple and well-intentioned in the beginning degenerated into idolatry more extreme than that found among many heathen nations. While such abominations contrary to Scripture and reason persist in the church, alongside the scandalous lives of many who claim the name of Christ, the very name of Christianity becomes repulsive to Muslims, Jews, and infidels.

When painted gospel stories gradually evolved into objects of idolatry, some godly leaders of the time detected the danger and commanded that such pictures, images, or idols should no longer be used.

2.15.1 Jerome on Idolatrous Syncretism

Jerome, writing about 160 years after Christ's ascension, sharply condemned images and idols in works such as *Against the Manner of Crowning* and *Of the Soldier's Crown or Garland* (Jerome, 395). He warned the early saints not only to avoid the service and worship of idols but even their shapes and likenesses. This aligned well with the Apostle John's command in 1 John 5:21: "*Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*" Jerome considered it unworthy for the image of the living God to be reduced to the likeness of a dead idol. Those who place images and idols in churches and temples, or on the Lord's table, have either never read, or have read but not understood, or deliberately ignore the counsel of John and the writings of Jerome.

2.15.2 Origen on Idolatrous Syncretism

Origen, in *Contra Celsum*, records that Christians and Jews, upon hearing the words of the Lord and the Law – "*Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, and shalt not make any image*" – abhorred the temples, altars, and images of the gods. If necessary, they would rather die than defile themselves with impiety. In the Jewish commonwealth, carvers of idols and image-makers were banished and forbidden from the community to prevent them from seducing the masses away from the living God.

Origen further argues that it is not only mad and frantic to worship images but even to wink at them. It is impossible to know God and His ways through the worship of images, because idol worship is not the means God has appointed for that purpose. He quotes Heraclitus: "*Those who approach lifeless things as gods act like a man who holds conversation with houses*" (Origen, 248). For Origen, approaching or tolerating images offends Scripture and apostolic practice.

2.15.3 Athanasius on Idolatrous Syncretism

In *Against the Heathens* (*Adversus Gentes*), Athanasius challenges the view that God can be known by an image. If by the material, then no shape or form is needed, since God has appeared in all material creatures that testify to His glory. If by the form or fashion, then God is better known through living things whose fashions the images merely copy. The glory of God would be more evidently known if declared by reasonable and living creatures rather than by dead and immovable images.

Therefore, when people engrave or paint images in order to know God thereby, they do something unworthy and unfit that offends all Scripture and apostolic practice. Athanasius declares that the invention of idols is wholly due not to good but to evil, and what has its origin in evil can never be pronounced good in any point (Schaff, 2012).

2.15.4 Lactantius on Idolatrous Syncretism

Lactantius, an early church father living around 300 A D, wrote in *The Origins of Error* (or *Divine Institutes*) that God is above man and is not placed beneath but is to be

sought in the highest region. There is no doubt that no true religion exists wherever any image is present. If religion stands in godly things and there is no godliness but in heavenly things, then images are without religion (Lactantius, 311).

2.15.5 Cyril of Alexandria on Idolatrous Syncretism

In his *commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*, Cyril of Alexandria laments that many have abandoned the Creator and worshiped the creature. They are not ashamed to say to a stock, “*Thou art my father*,” and to a stone, “*Thou begottest me*.” Many have fallen into such folly and given the glory of the Deity to things without sense or feeling.

2.15.6 Bishop Epiphanius on Idolatrous Syncretism

Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 315-403), a respected bishop during the reign of Theodosius I, is an important early Christian witness against idolatrous syncretism, particularly the use of images in Christian worship. Around 390AD, he wrote a letter to John II of Jerusalem describing an incident that reveals his convictions. While visiting a church at Anablatha, Epiphanius saw a curtain hanging at the entrance, decorated with an image “either of Christ or of one of the saints.” Troubled that such an image appeared in a place dedicated to Christ contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures, he tore the curtain down and urged that it be used as a burial cloth for a poor person.

When the custodians of the church objected him demanding for a replacement, Epiphanius agreed and later sent a plain curtain which he purchased from Cyprus. He instructed that such image-bearing curtains, “*opposed as they are to our religion*,” should not be used in any church. He further emphasized that faithful church leaders must remove anything that might become an “occasion of offence” among believers. The account reflects his strong pastoral concern to guard Christian worship from practices he believed compromised its purity.

The letter was translated into Latin by Jerome, who held Epiphanius in high esteem, calling him a man of great authority and holiness. In his writings, Jerome notes that even hostile rulers like Valens refrained from harming Epiphanius, and that even heretics respected his character. Later traditions, recorded by Cassiodorus, attribute miracles to Epiphanius and recount that demons were expelled near his tomb, further enhancing his reputation in church history.

Epiphanius’ stance on images can be summarized in five key points.

- a) He judged all images in churches to be contrary to Scripture and the Christian faith.
- b) He rejected not only carved or molten images but also painted ones.

- c) He made no distinction between images of Christ and those of saints—both were equally unacceptable.
- d) His actions demonstrated zeal: he destroyed the image and considered it fit only for burial use.
- e) He taught that bishops have a duty to ensure that no such images are permitted, since they may cause confusion or lead believers into error.

The above actions confirm that around the fourth century, the early Church—at least still in its purer form—did not accept the use of images in public worship. This position is linked to the continuity of the Second Commandment, which forbids idolatry and is understood here as a moral law binding on all people for all generations. Unlike ceremonial laws like the Jewish Sabbath, it remains permanently in force. This view is reinforced by the New Testament question: “*What hath the temple of God to do with idols?*” (2 Corinthians 6:16), implying a strict separation between true worship and material representations.

Historical evidence from the Jewish context strengthens this argument. During periods of foreign rule, Jews resisted attempts by rulers like Antiochus Epiphanes to introduce idols into the temple, even at the cost of their lives. Flavius Josephus commends this resistance, noting that such sacrifices would not have been made if images were considered acceptable in God’s house. This continuity suggests that early Christians inherited a similar aversion to images.

Over time, however, images gradually began to enter Christian settings, often beginning in private homes before appearing in churches as paintings or decorative items. According to this account, vigilant leaders like Epiphanius opposed these developments and removed such objects when discovered. Writers like Jerome and other early theologians are presented as sharing this view, that the introduction of images was a form of syncretism and an adoption of pagan practices into Christian worship.

Attempts to dismiss Epiphanius’ views as influenced by Jewish bias are frivolous and baseless and should be countered by noting that many early Christian leaders like Augustine of Hippo and Ambrose hailed from Gentile backgrounds where images were very common, but still rejected their use in worship. The argument concludes that the validity of a teaching does not depend upon on its author’s background but upon its agreement with Scripture, which consistently condemns idolatry.

An illustrative example is given by Ambrose of Milan, who recounts that Helena, mother of Constantine, discovered the cross of Christ. Ambrose mentions that Helena “*worshiped the King, not the wood,*” carefully distinguishing devotion to Christ from reverence for the physical object. This distinction is contrasted with later practices in

which people literally venerate material representations, such as crosses, in ways that risk repeating the very errors earlier Christians sought to avoid.

Epiphanius' actions and writings are a strong historical evidence that early Christianity rejected the use of images in worship. His example underscores a broader concern: that even seemingly harmless representations can become sources of confusion or idolatry, and that faithful leaders must actively guard the purity of worship in accordance with Scripture.

2.15.7 Augustine on Idolatrous Syncretism

Saint Augustine, the most learned of the ancient doctors, wrote in his *epistle to Maximus*:

“Know that none of the dead, nor anything that is made by God, is worshipped as God by Catholic Christians” (Augustine, *The City of God* (De Civitate Dei), Book XXII, Chapter 10, AD 400).

Those who worship the dead or creatures are not true Catholic Christians. In *City of God*, he teaches that neither temples nor churches ought to be built for martyrs or saints, but for God alone, and no priests ought to be appointed for martyrs or saints, but for God only.

In *On the Manners of the Catholic Church*, Augustine laments that many worship tombs and pictures and hold riotous banquets over the graves of the dead, attributing gluttony and drunkenness to religion. He celebrates Marcus Varro, who affirmed that the Christian religion is purest without images, and states that images have more power to crook an unhappy soul than to teach and instruct it. Varro observed that every child and beast knows it is not God they see in images and asks, *“why then does the Holy Ghost so often warn against what all men know?”* and Augustine replies that when images are placed in temples in honourable positions and begin to be worshiped, the vilest affection of error breaks out. His judgment was that images in churches breed error and idolatry.

2.15.8 The Record of Eusebius Pamphylus

Eusebius of Caesarea and Jerome both argue that the use of images in Christianity originated from Gentile (pagan) customs rather than apostolic teaching. In *Ecclesiastical History* (Book VII, Chapter 18) and Jerome's commentary on Jeremiah, they describe how early Christians, losing sight of their calling as heavenly *pilgrims*, gradually conformed to surrounding cultures, leading to idolatrous syncretism.

Eusebius recounts a statue at Caesarea Philippi depicting a kneeling woman and a man, believed by locals to represent the woman healed by Christ and Jesus Himself. He explains that Gentile converts, accustomed to honoring religious benefactors with

statues, introduced such practices into Christianity. They made Images of Peter, Paul, and even the Saviour, reflecting lingering pagan habits. Jerome agrees, identifying this as an error accruing from gentile practices that were not fully purged after conversion.

We may compare this to Acts 15:5, where the apostles resisted the imposition of circumcision on Gentiles. If even circumcision, a rite with roots in scripture was rejected, then why shouldn't practices like image-making that are totally averse to scripture be resisted even more strongly?

Initially, such images were private and not objects of worship, arising from “*zeal without knowledge*” (Romans 10:2). However, they gradually spread into churches, fostering superstition and eventually idolatry. By around AD 460, figures like Paulinus of Nola introduced wall paintings to instruct or restrain people, but later developed into full-fledged religious images within churches.

2.15.9 Public Decrees Against Idolatrous Syncretism

The first public decrees forbidding the making and painting of images were issued by Christian emperors Valens and Theodosius II around AD 400. History confirms there were no images in public temples during their time. They wrote to the captain of the army:

“Whereas we have diligent care to maintain the religion of God above all things, we will grant to no man to set forth, carve, engrave, or paint the image of our Saviour Christ in colours, stone, or any other matter; but in whatever place any such shall be found, we command that it be taken away, and that all who shall attempt anything contrary to our decrees or commandment herein shall be most sharply punished” (Crinitus, 1504).

For the first 300+ years after Christ, no images were publicly present in churches. After the reign of such godly princes, barbarian invasions by Goths, Vandals, Huns, and others destroyed cities, libraries, and places of worship. Learning, true religion, and civilization suffered. Bishops, less learned and disrupted by war, took less heed. Widespread ignorance of God's word, episcopal negligence, and barbaric kings unprepared in true religion opened doors for images to flood into churches across Europe. Images moved from painted cloths to embossed forms in stone, timber, and metal, and began to be worshiped.

2.15.10 Bishop Serenus of Marseille's Intervention

Bishop Serenus of Marseille, a godly and learned man living in France around 600 AD, witnessed people falling into idolatry and the worship of images. Moved with compassion for their perishing souls, he smashed to pieces all images of Christ and the saints in the city. Enraged lovers of idols complained to Pope Gregory the Great in Rome. Gregory was the first prominent bishop in antiquity to allow the public use of images in churches; many contemporary defenders of image worship base their position on his legacy.

Image worship began mildly and tolerably but gradually worsened until it became unbearable. It started privately in homes as painted stories on panels, cloths, and walls, then moved to embossed images.

2.15.11 Gregory the Great's Ruling on Bishop Serenus

Learned and godly men opposed the creeping use of images, but their voices were not heeded. Through custom, images became publicly accepted in churches, though worship was still forbidden in theory. Gregory's epistle to Serenus is key:

"While putting aside consideration of our wholesome admonitions, you have come to be culpable, not only in your deeds, but in your questioning also. For indeed it had been reported to us that, inflamed with inconsiderate zeal, you had broken images of saints, as though under the plea that they ought not to be adored. And indeed, in that you forbade them to be adored, we altogether praise you; but we blame you for having broken them. ... For to adore a picture is one thing, but to learn through the story of a picture what is to be adored is another. For what writing presents to readers, this a picture presents to the unlearned who behold... Hence, and chiefly to the nations, a picture is instead of reading. ... If for this instruction for which images were anciently made you wish to have them in the church, I permit them by all means both to be made and to be had. And explain to them that it was not the sight itself of the story which the picture was hanging to attest that displeased you, but the adoration which had been improperly paid to the pictures. ... And if any one should wish to make images, by no means prohibit him, but by all means forbid the adoration of images" (Gregory, To Serenus of Marseilles, circa 599-600).

Gregory I's letter above (c. AD 600) reflects a transitional stage in idolatrous syncretism when the Western Church started permitting images but forbidding their worship. Although Gregory explicitly condemned adoration, his position was misunderstood, leading many to assume images should be widely displayed. As a result, multitudes fell into the heinous sin of idolatry, fulfilling the fears earlier raised by Serenus of Marseille, who had destroyed them to prevent abuse.

This development had major consequences. It contributed to the growing divide between Eastern and Western Christianity, eventually producing a schism that weakened the Church and exposed it to external pressures, including the rise of Islam and continued persecution. Idolatry is portrayed as causing the departure of God's glory "*Ichabod*", which left the Church spiritually weak after touching the accursed things, like the host Israel the battle of Ai in Joshua 7.

Later figures like Constantine II promoted images, while others such as Leo III opposed them, further deepening divisions.

2.15.12 Emperor Leo III and the Iconoclastic Movement

The Byzantine Iconoclast movement of 8th-9th century opposed idolatrous syncretism, rejecting icon practices as pagan distortions of Christian worship. Leo III affirmed that honoring images—through bowing, kissing, or candles—corrupted true devotion. Influenced by Jewish and Islamic critiques, he ordered icons destroyed, burned publicly in Constantinople, and church walls cleared, and punished dissenters who defied his laws.

In response, Gregory III convened a council of Italian Bishops at Ravenna in Rome, defending images, promoting their veneration, and encouraging resistance in Italy, a clash which deepened divisions and broadened the conflict between imperial reformers and church authorities over images in worship.

2.15.13 Emperor Constantine V and the Council of Hieria (AD 754)

Constantine V (r. after Leo III) continued the policy of excluding images from churches and, in AD 754, convened the Council of Hieria near Constantinople. The synod, attended by 338 bishops and led by Theodorus of Ephesus, responded to pro-image positions in the West.

Its decree (horos) argued that Satan had reintroduced idolatry by leading people to “*worship the creature rather than the Creator.*” While the Law, prophets, and Christ’s apostles taught worship “*in spirit and truth,*” the devil revived image-worship under a Christian guise. The council condemned the art of painting living creatures as a distortion of the Incarnation and contrary to earlier councils. It insisted that depicting saints—who live in glory—through “dead matter” was blasphemous.

Appealing to Scripture and the Fathers, the council declared that all images must be “*rejected, removed, and cursed*” from the Church. Those who made, venerated, or secretly kept them—whether clergy or laity—were to be deposed or anathematized. Opponents like Bishop John Damascene resisted these rulings, and Pope Paul I bitterly rejected the council and upheld image veneration.

Despite this opposition, iconoclastic policy prevailed widely in the East for nearly 700 years, marking what supporters viewed as a purer post-apostolic era.

2.15.14 Relapse under Irene Theodora

Irene Theodora of Athens, widow of Leo IV, restored icon veneration after ending iconoclasm and, with Bishop Tarasius, convened the Second Council of Nicaea (787), where iconoclasm was overturned and ties with Rome renewed. Like Athaliah of 2Kings 11:2 and 2Chronicles 22-23 she deposed her iconoclast son Constantine VI and ruled until 802. Roman bishops promoted images through political intrigue and rebellion. Acting on their counsel, Irene desecrated her father-in-law Constantine V’s remains and burned

them in the fire for opposing images—a substance of extreme iconophile zeal and abuse of power.

2.15.15 Hieria reforms overturned

Empress Irene Theodora played a pivotal role in overturning the reforms of the Hieria council, which under Constantine V had condemned the veneration of images as heretical. Acting on the influence of Pope Adrian, Patriarch Paul, and Tarasius, Irene convened a council at Nicaea in 787, known as the Second Council of Nicaea. This assembly condemned Hieria's decrees and mandated the erection, veneration, and worship of images throughout Greek churches. Irene's vigorous efforts led to a rapid resurgence of idol worship in Constantinople, paralleling Rome's practices, despite earlier restrictions by Gregory I. There is always a tendency for images to be worshiped along the way, once introduced.

When Constantine VI ascended the throne, he was dismissed by her mother and critical iconophile bishops of Rome as inexperienced but acted decisively against his mother Irene's idolatry, reminiscent of the biblical Josiah. Raised in the true religion of his father, Constantine VI destroyed the idols Irene had set up. However, Irene later regained power and through manipulation misled Constantine to commit atrocities against relatives which led to his downfall. Eventually his mother Irene deposed him, gouged out his eyes, imprisoned, and killed him. Historical accounts note that the sun darkened for 17 days during this turmoil, symbolizing divine judgment and the spiritual darkness caused by idolatry and syncretism, which obscured Christendom's light.

Irene Theodora was as ambitious and treacherous as Medea and Procne, and not a virtuous ruler. Despite her wickedness, some iconophile historians paradoxically praised her as a godly empress sent by God, driven by their own superstitious love for images. Superstition is an odious and destructive vice that not only blinds the soul to the light of truth, but also fosters idol worship and moral corruption. Irene was ultimately deposed for treason, including betraying the empire to Charles, King of the Franks, and secretly marrying him, and condemned into exile, where her murderous and idolatrous life ended.

2.15.16 The Councils of Elvira (Granada) 305-306 and Toledo XII (681)

Parallel to these events, the issue of idolatry was addressed in Spain at the Council of Elvira (Granada) in 305-306, where Canon 36 stated that pictures should not be in churches, warning that honoring or worshiping images on walls leads to idolatry. Canon 41 also forbade images in private homes, emphasizing that believers should abstain from them or face excommunication. Spain's stance aligned with Greek opposition to images, reflecting a broader Christian rejection of idol worship during this period.

The Twelfth Council of Toledo in 681 also condemned images and image-worshippers. When the Bishop of Rome and his supporters learned of Elvira's decrees against images,

they feared rejection in Germany. With the backing of the powerful King of the Franks, he assembled a council at Frankfurt that condemned Elvira's decrees as the "*Felician heresy*" (named after Bishop Felix of Aquitaine who had chaired the council) and ratified the decrees of Nicaea II of Irene Theodora in Germany. Catholic historians often intentionally omit to mention the dissenting council at Frankfurt convened under the Emperor Charlemagne, who called Nicaea II arrogant, foolish, and ungodly and designed Frankfurt 794 explicitly against it. Charlemagne induced his bishops to condemn the self-styled Seventh Ecumenical Council as superfluous and declared that neither worship nor adoration was to be paid to images of the saints.

Historically, Rome has been accused of falsifying early church documents to justify papal authority, as also exemplified by the forged Donation of Constantine (8th century), that was later exposed by Lorenzo Valla in 1439-1440. This document falsely claimed Constantine transferred authority over Rome and the West to the pope, supporting perennial papal dominance and undermining of secular rulers, a move which still exists even in present times, and influenced the secularization of Western states.

The conflicts over images contributed to the division of the empire and the church. After Irene's deposition, the Greek princes chose Nicephorus, rejected by Rome, leading to multiple emperors and a schism. When Irene agreed at Nicaea II to restore images, her opponents in Greece opposed her, leading to her overthrow and deepening East-West tensions. These divisions, combined with invasions by Saracens and Turks, resulted in the fall of Constantinople (1453) and the loss of vast Christian territories, often attributed to the spiritual and political chaos caused by idolatrous syncretism.

Throughout history, various church councils have condemned image worship as contrary to biblical teaching. Early church fathers and ecumenical councils consistently opposed images, viewing them as abominations. The widespread destruction of idols by Christian emperors and bishops around 1,400 years ago exemplifies this stance.

2.15.17 Martyrdom Commemorations in the Early Church

In the early church, martyrdom signified the ultimate act of witness — the willing surrender of one's life for confession of faith in Christ. *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (Ferguson, 1990) explains that "*martyr*" evolved from "*witness*" to denote those killed for their faith, as seen in second-century texts like the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (c. 167) and writings of Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Eusebius. Early Christians distinguished martyrs (those who died) from confessors (those who survived persecution), reserving "*martyr*" exclusively for the former. This underscored that martyrdom was a divine grace, an imitation and participation in Christ's sufferings, a "*baptism of blood*" securing one an immediate entrance into God's presence without awaiting the general resurrection (Revelation 6:10-11).

Commemoration of martyrs emerged organically from this theology. As persecutions intensified in the 3rd century under Decius and Diocletian, such commemorations

became part of the church calendar. In the peace under Constantine (4th century), expressions of honour to martyrs flourished but remained within strict theological boundaries. The early church consciously rejected pagan models of hero cults, ancestor veneration, or deification of the dead. Instead, commemorations served edification, imitation of Christ, and thanksgiving to God alone.

The church viewed martyrdom as a singular grace, not something to be sought rashly (*Polycarp, Martyrdom* ch. 4). It was participation in Christ's passion; Christ was present strengthening the martyr, and the Holy Spirit inspired eloquence and victory over demonic forces operating through the tormentors. Eucharistic imagery was prominent; Tertullian described it as a second baptism of blood bringing forgiveness of sins (*On Baptism*, ch. 16).

Augustine later clarified that martyrs were not gods but holy men whose victories prompt thanksgiving to the true God. Martyrs' commemorations flowed from their privileged status as perfect disciples who realized gospel promises immediately. Their relics and tombs became sites of prayer and healing, not because martyrs were divine, but because God worked through their witness. John of Damascus later articulated the distinction: *dualia* (veneration) belongs to relics and saints, but *latreia* (true worship) is reserved for God alone. This framework prevented slide into idolatry, even as the church borrowed and repurposed cultural forms (e.g., commemorative meals).

2.15.18 The Development of Martyrdom Commemorative Practice

By the fourth century, annual commemorations of a martyr's "*birthday into eternity*" (*dies natalis*) became part of the calendar. These were initially local and small-scale events, recorded in early martyrologies, and later shared across churches. Core elements of the earliest commemorations included:

1. Preaching a panegyric on the martyr's life and death.
2. Eulogies by pious bishops and devout preachers like Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Eusebius, John Chrysostom, Ephrem the Syrian and others.

Orations used classical rhetoric subordinated to Christian ends of edification and exhortation to imitate the martyrs' virtues. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* modeled gospel-shaped witness. The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne (177) portrayed Christ suffering in His members. The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* and *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* manifested visions and prophetic gifts. Exhortations by Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian prepared believers without glorifying death itself.

Commemoration services included a vigil of prayer, Scripture readings, hymns, and preaching, often culminating in the Eucharist. Martyr memorial buildings (*martyria*) were erected over tombs as houses of God purportedly, not temples to martyrs. Pilgrimage to sites and burial near relics expressed hope in the resurrection, not magical power independent of God.

2.16 Early Church Safeguards Against Syncretism and Idolatry in Martyrdom Commemorations

The early church was acutely aware of pagan parallels (funerary meals, hero cults, ancestor invocation) and deliberately Christianised or rejected them. Commemorative meals shifted from the deceased's birthday to the anniversary of death (birth into eternity). Pagan feasts honouring dead heroes were converted into Eucharistic celebrations and acts of charity (Cyprian, c. 205).

Abuses quickly appeared in drunkenness and revelry mirroring the Roman Pagan feast *Parentalia* (a nine-day festival honoring ancestors with offerings of food, wine, and flowers) or African traditional religious customs for the dead.

2.17 Bishop Ambrose's Correction of Augustine's Mother

In his *Confessions*, Augustine recounts a significant episode involving his mother, Monica, which illustrates early Christian efforts to distinguish genuine devotion from pagan superstition. Monica, following her North African customs, would bring modest offerings of cakes, bread, and diluted wine to oratories built in honor of martyrs during commemorations. These practices, rooted in local tradition, often resembled pagan rites associated with ancestor worship and festivities, which are still practiced even in ATR funeral rites. When Augustine's mother learned that Bishop Ambrose of Milan had forbidden such offerings to deter pagan idolatrous excesses and superstition in the church, she obediently ceased her practice, replacing her offerings with sincere prayers and almsgiving. In his *Confessions*, Augustine marvels at her mother's readiness to relinquish her customs, noting that she piously and obediently acceded despite her love for culture.

Augustine describes her mother's moderation in the martyrdom commemorations that she would taste only a small, watered-down cup of wine, distributing it in small sips to others, seeking devotion rather than pleasure. Monica's refusal to indulge in drunkenness, even in the context of martyrdom commemorations, exemplifies her piety. Her son notes that she carried her cup across multiple oratories (chapels dedicated to martyr memorials), aiming more to honor the martyrs by supporting the needy, a shift from material offerings to heartfelt petitions and almsgiving.

Augustine reflects that her willingness to abandon her customs was largely due to Ambrose's influence, whom she revered for his piety. He observes that her love for Ambrose's teachings and her desire for salvation motivated her to cast off practices that bore pagan connotations, which could be mistaken for superstition. Augustine notes,

"she would not so easily have given way to the relinquishment of this custom had it been forbidden by another whom she loved not as Ambrose,"

Monica's experience underscores the importance of spiritual authority and authentic faith.

Tertullian in the late second century had documented the veneration of martyrs, noting that their death anniversaries, called *natalitia*, involved offerings—initially as a form of reverence and later as excesses that bordered on superstition. These commemorations often mimicked pagan festivals with revelry and drunkenness, and when Augustine came later, he sought to correct them in his own community at Hippo.

Bishop Augustine explains that after the great persecutions, converts accustomed to pagan rites and drunken festivities found it difficult to abandon such customs, prompting the church to adapt these practices into more spiritual acts of devotion, emphasizing prayer and charity. The overarching goal was to purge practices rooted in pagan superstition, replacing them with authentic Christian worship that honored God and the martyrs without risking syncretism or idolatry.

2.18 Origins of Relics, holy water Pilgrimages, Veneration of Holy Places and pilgrimages in Christianity

The use of relics, holy water, the veneration of martyrs, holy places, and the undertaking of pilgrimages in Christianity did not arise in isolation. These practices developed through Christianity's encounter with biblical symbols, Jewish purification rites, Greco-Roman pagan cults, and various folk traditions. Early Church leaders often adapted these elements to facilitate evangelization in diverse cultural contexts, reinterpreting them christologically. However, this adaptation sometimes inadvertently blended them with local spiritualities, enabling rapid expansion but generating tensions that Reformation and Puritan theologians later identified as syncretic corruptions diverging from primitive apostolic doctrinal purity. In this part of the study, we trace the origins of holy places, relics, pilgrimages, and ritual water, their institutionalization, and the critiques they faced.

2.19 The Veneration of Holy Places and the Rise of Pilgrimages

Early Christianity centered its sacred sites around locations associated with Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension, such as the nativity cave, Golgotha, the sepulchre, and the Mount of Ascension. However, pagan influences, notably Hadrian's construction of a Venus temple over Jesus' tomb, delayed the open veneration of these sites. By 212 AD, Jerome's friend Alexander visited these locations for prayer and research. Origen also visited the sites seeking the footsteps of Christ, prophets and Apostles. Around 325 AD, Constantine's mother Helena visited the sites, and played a developed them, and this influenced the growth of Christian pilgrimage practices (Leon-Dufour, 1972). A pilgrim from Bordeaux documented these sites in 333 AD, making them more accessible to believers.

Over time, pilgrimages multiplied, chiefly motivated by people's need to fulfil their vows for instance Constantine's intent to find Jordan's baptism site and Eusebius's account of Bethabara. Other reasons included the search for spiritual benefits, devotion, and penance. Extreme offenders were sometimes dispatched there for penance, a practice critiqued for fostering abuse. William Smith et al. note that as early as 386 AD, figures like Paula and Eustochium observed a constant stream of pilgrims, eager to adore Christ at places where the Gospel's story first unfolded.

Nevertheless, fathers like Gregory of Nyssa (370 AD) warned against the moral and spiritual risks of pilgrimage, noting the lack of clear command and the immoral behavior often associated with pilgrims' travels through cities and Jerusalem. Jerome (393 AD) echoed this concern, stating that true cleansing came from internal piety, not merely visiting holy sites. He insisted that godliness is rooted in internal virtue, not external travel thus;

"A very great error is committed by certain persons, who ill-advisedly travel to Rome, or Tours and certain other places under the pretence of prayer... There are also poor persons who undertake it either merely to have a better plea for begging... or because they are so senseless as to think themselves cleansed from their sins by the mere sight of holy places" (Jerome, 384, as cited). (Jerome, 384).

The Council of Chalon-sur-Saône, a significant ecclesiastical synod ordered by Charlemagne in 813 AD to address various reforms within the Church, including the regulation of pilgrimages condemned the laxity among clergy and the misuse of pilgrimages, criticizing those who traveled under false pretenses or sought forgiveness through sight of holy places.

By the mid-fourth century, certain sites, such as Rome for Peter and Paul, and Nola for Saint Felix, gained the status of *loca sancta* (holy places), attracting numerous pilgrims. Cassian (424 AD) describes monks traveling specifically for prayer at saintly tombs or relics, often seeking healing or spiritual benefits, sometimes leading to abuses like relic theft or false claims. Physical places should not be idolized and esteemed more strategic for accessing God than others because after Christ's ascension, spiritual adoration in spirit and truth is required (John 4:21, 23-24). Tying worship to specific places or objects without divine warrant is idolatry, as with golden calves at Dan/Bethel versus the authorized ark/temple.

The discovery of the "True Cross" in 347 AD, believed to be uncovered by Helena after tearing down a pagan temple, intensified pilgrimages, although doubts about its authenticity persist (Eusebius remains silent, Cyril does not mention it). The said Cross is said to have healed a dying woman and revived a corpse, rumors which fueled relic cults.

Notable figures like Gregory of Tours and Arculfus attest to the growing traffic of relics and the rise of associated legends, illustrating the complex interplay of faith, geography, and emerging religious cults in early Christian history.



This icon of Mary at Our Lady of Guadalupe Shrine in Mexico is excessively venerated

2.20 Relics, Memorials, Miracles, and Mediation

Relics originated from a zealous desire to honor saints, categorized into two classes: entire bodies or parts, and contact objects like clothes, tomb dust, or lamp oil. The concept of martyrdom evolved from “witness” to bloodshed testimony, with Polycarp of Smyrna (c. 155 AD) marking one of the earliest martyr anniversaries. Martyrs included confessors and witnesses, and even those resisting witchcraft resisting at death bed, but heretics, schismatics, and iconoclasts were usually excluded. Relics embodied the communion of saints and were linked to holy sites, and later on miracles began to be attributed to them—such as cures by blessed water or relics, which gave rise to longings for tangible mediation in worship, an ingredient imported from paganism. Gregory of Tours recounts healing miracles involving martyr relics. By the fourth century, pilgrimages to relic shrines became widespread, combining penance, healing, and intercession through them—practices of non-biblical origin.

2.21 Biblical Perspective on Water Use in Sacred Worship and holy water

Water holds a central place in biblical theology, symbolizing both life and death, purification and destruction. Xavier Leon-Dufour notes that water represents “*the source and strength of life*” but also “*waters of death*,” like the destructive flood (Bauer, 1970). In Israelite thought, water is under divine sovereignty, divided into “*waters from on high*”—rain, dew, and springs—and “*waters from below*”—the abyss supporting the earth. God controls these elements, causing drought or flood as acts of

judgment or blessing (Job 12:15; Psalm 104). Psalm 104 synthesizes this mastery, depicting God's control over waters to sustain life and prosperity.

Water's universal significance is reflected in myths and rituals worldwide, symbolizing life, fertility, and purification. Bauer explains that in baptism, immersion signifies death to the old self and rebirth into new life, making water an outward symbol of renewal and cleansing of sins. The Bible describes water as a sign of divine blessing and judgment—miracles like turning water into wine (John 2:1-11), calming storms (Mark 4:35-41), and drought as punishment for infidelity (Amos 1:2). Prophets envision God and the temple as the “source of living water” (Jeremiah 2:13; Isaiah 12), merging purification, and salvation.

Ceremonially, water was used for purity—ablutions for leprosy, ritual impurities, and priestly cleansing (Leviticus 14-15; Numbers 19). Handwashing symbolized internal purity (Psalm 26:6) and purification rites involved water tests like the bitter water ordeal (Numbers 5). In the New Testament, baptism epitomizes spiritual rebirth, with passages emphasizing its significance (John 3:1-12; Acts 2:38). However, nowhere in Scripture is there an ordinance instituting the continuous use of “*holy water*” as a universal element for spiritual healing; biblical water symbolism culminates in baptism alone, and worship is anchored in focus on God's presence rather than sacred objects, elements or sites (Leon-Dufour, 1967/1972; Bauer, 1970).



Thousands queue for holy water at Kibeho Shrine, Rwanda, where Virgin Mary is purportedly alleged to have appeared in 1991 and the commemoration attracts 60,000 pilgrims annually.

The use of holy water as a medium of worship came from a blending of biblical, Jewish, pagan, and mystic traditions. Early churches adopted basins for handwashing, echoing Mosaic and Greek pagan temple rites. As pagan practices declined, priests continued sprinkling rituals.

Augustine observes that some people began to bring their children for baptism not because of its biblical promise and significance, but in search for miraculous healings. Thereafter, post-baptism water began to be used for aspersions in homes and fields, with the Arian leaning Apostolical Constitutions (c. 375 AD) prescribing blessings, exorcisms, and healing virtues through *holy water*, though the practice that had no biblical backing.

Pope Leo IV (847 AD) mandated weekly blessings of holy water, called “*Gregorian water*,” for church consecration, and Hincmar of Reims permitted its use in blessings at home. Over time, the element of water biblically confined only to the sacrament baptism in matters of worship, assumed independent protective powers to cleanse and heal because of superstition, exemplifying syncretic expansion beyond original apostolic practice.

2.22 Reformation and Puritan Theological Critiques of the Use of Relics, Holy Water, Holy Pilgrimages, Holy Places, and Martyrs Veneration

The Protestant and English Reformers plus the Puritans in England mounted a vigorous theological critique on relics, holy water, pilgrimages, saints and martyr veneration, and pilgrimages to holy places. They viewed these customs as corruptions of true Christianity, rooted in pagan syncretism, and contrary to biblical teaching. The reformers contended that such devotions improperly diverted honor from God to created objects, fostered superstition, and obscured the core gospel message of salvation by faith alone *sola gratia*. Their critiques were grounded in a strict adherence to Scripture, exposing how medieval Christianity had compromised biblical truth, reason and Apostolic Christian tradition.

Martin Luther’s disillusionment with relics and pilgrimages stemmed from personal experiences in his 1510 pilgrimage to Rome where he witnessed a busy marketplace of fraudulent relics and indulgences that he later condemned in his works as spiritually bankrupt. In his *To the Christian Nobility* (1520), Luther rejected pilgrimages outright, writing that,

“All pilgrimages should be done away with... For there is no good in them, no commandment, but countless causes of sin.”

He ridiculed relics, saying, “*If all the pieces of the True Cross were collected, they would fill a ship*” (1545), and dismissed claims about relics like the head of John the Baptist as “*the greatest lies*” (Luther, Table Talk, 1540). For Luther, relics exemplified works-righteousness, distracting believers from salvation by faith alone *sola fide*, and had no biblical warrant.

Calvin’s systematic critique in his 1543 *Treatise on Relics* labeled relic veneration as idolatry. He termed it “*the mother of idolatry*,” and a sacrilege to worship dead objects

instead of the living God. He emphasized that relics and their veneration had roots in pagan superstition, and warned that honoring relics could lead Christians astray.

John Calvin also denounced the superstitious use of holy water, which lacked biblical basis outside baptism, and condemned pilgrimages to Jerusalem, asserting that physical sites held no spiritual advantage. He quoted Gregory of Nyssa thus:

“The court of heaven is equally open from Jerusalem and Britain” (Epistle on Pilgrimages, 379).

Calvin reasoned that saints were to be imitated, not invoked, and that relics and relic cults diverted attention from Christ as the sole mediator (1 Timothy 2:5).

Puritans like Henry Wikinson extended these critiques to the extremes, even viewing relics, holy water, pilgrimages, and saint veneration as the fulfillment of biblical warnings against the *“man of sin”* (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4) and the influence of the powers of the Antichrist.

Samuel Lee emphasized Christ as the only foundation, condemned prayers to saints and angels, and Richard Mayo opposed praying for the dead, which was linked to relic-based indulgences. William Jenkin insisted that every sin deserves eternal damnation, rejecting merit-based systems like pilgrimages and relics. Benjamin Needler declared, *“It is not lawful to give religious worship to any creature whatsoever,”* condemning papist practices that left out the Second Commandment of the Decalogue.

Both Luther and the Puritans insisted that Scripture alone authorizes worship, and anything not commanded in the Bible—such as relic processions, holy-water blessings, and pilgrimage site obsession—is *“will-worship”* (Colossians 2:23). They argued that honor due only to God must not be redirected to objects or places, warning that such practices foster idolatry (Romans 1:25). Their reforms emphasized Christ alone as mediator, faith alone for salvation, and Scripture as the ultimate rule.

Ultimately, the views of the Reformers reveal how medieval compromise with pagan influences, where saints replaced demigods, springs became holy wells, and temples turned into shrines, had corrupted biblical worship. Luther’s demythologization and the Puritans’ sermons aimed to restore biblical purity, avoiding even Protestant-style martyrdom memorial cults around graves. Dixon and Scott (2017) confirm that no widespread relic cults persisted among confessional Protestants post reformation, but instead, their faith remained rooted in Scripture and doctrine, upholding the principles of sola scriptura.

CHAPTER THREE: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

This chapter presents qualitative data from 24 respondents, clergy, theologians, historians, and lay Christians from various denominations regarding their familiarity with the June 3rd martyrs' commemoration at Namugongo.

3.1 Interview results

The data are organized thematically to explore perceptions, experiences, motivations, and observations directly related to syncretism—the blending of Christian practices with non-biblical, indigenous, or culturally adapted elements in the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations. It includes summaries that provide analytical flow and context, verbatim quotations capturing respondents' voices on issues like holy water, relic veneration, commercialization, and theological concerns, along with patterns in belief, personal testimonies, and historical recollections, forming a comprehensive foundation for interpretation and analysis.

3.1.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The study surveyed 24 respondents, providing a balanced demographic profile. Denominationally, 22 were Anglicans (91.6%), 1 Catholic (4%), 1 Pentecostal with Catholic roots (4%). Ages ranged from 14 to 84 years, with clusters in the 30-40 age group and over 60. Gender distribution was 15 males (62.5%) and 9 females (37.5%).

Professionally, there were 13 theologians, 4 lay church elders, 2 students, and 5 ordinary pilgrims. Interviewing stopped due to data saturation as responses became repetitive. Attendance at Namugongo Martyrs' commemorations varied: 10 respondents attended 2-5 times (42%), 6 more than 5 times (25%), 6 once (25%), and 2 had never attended but had strong secondary knowledge (8%). Most (75%) traveled by vehicle or in groups.

This ensured diverse representation across pilgrims, theologians, and observers.

3.1.2 Respondents' theological and historical appreciation of the pilgrimages

Respondents offered both their theological and historical reflections on pilgrimage, highlighting its value and potential distortions.

Respondent 1, a theologian, argued that pilgrimage is meaningful when grounded in faith, likening it to Abraham's journey and describing it as a process of contemplation, solitude, and even suffering that ultimately leads to spiritual growth. He traced its history from early Christian limitations due to persecution, to renewed practice in the fourth century through Helena's visits to the Holy Land, and later medieval traditions involving indulgences at sites like Santiago de Compostela and Rome. He noted that such practices were criticized during the Reformation by Luther and Calvin as promoting salvation by works. He further observed that many Pentecostal churches shifted away

from pilgrimage, emphasizing prayer and scripture instead. He cited Vatican II, which declared all Christian life as a pilgrimage, and that pilgrimages contain many benefits like spiritual growth, unity, discipleship, and cultural connection.

Respondent 2 defined pilgrimage as a journey to heaven and the New Jerusalem, linking it to Abraham, who built altars because he longed to meet God, and to Israel's exodus and the three annual journeys to Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:16). She noted that the New Testament reorients pilgrimage toward a heavenly focus, presenting believers as a pilgrim church (1 Peter 2:11). Historically, she explained that Constantine revived physical pilgrimage through rebuilding Jerusalem, while medieval Christianity emphasized externals through relics. Respondent 2 rose categorized the Namugongo commemoration as a form of modern eclecticism. She criticized modern pilgrimage trends as often being *"all about benefits,"* and enquired thus,

"Is it all about us going there for gaining approval of our fellow human beings or to seriously encounter God? Is it utilized as a serious time of reflection? Can it be compared to obedience to God?"

influenced by practices such as grave visitation. Stressing proper motive, she asked, "What is your focus here on earth?... It is all about the heart not the externals" (Proverbs 4:23), questioning whether Namugongo promotes true encounter with God or mere social approval.

Respondent 3 warned of physical symbols at shrines becoming sacraments and called for urgent need to teach and revive a Biblical centered theology.

Respondent 3 gave his historical theological understanding of pilgrimages, mentioning how early figures like Helena and Jerome supported them, but Augustine stressed God's omnipresence as most important. That in the medieval period, indulgences had been turned into people's *"shortcuts to heaven,"* while Thomas Aquinas warned against outward practice without inner conviction. He mentioned that Reformers, including Luther (95 Theses), Calvin, and Zwingli, rejected pilgrimages as works-based religion, despite modern resurgence at sites like Namugongo. He said that 2 out of 10 of those who go there seek recognition, 5 out of 10 have genuine causes, and 3 out of 10 go for idolatrous acts, urging a return to biblical teaching.

Respondent 4 echoed biblical foundations of pilgrimage (Deuteronomy 16:16, Isaiah 2:3 as an expression of obedience, devotion and covenantal faithfulness) and Jesus' participation (Luke 2:41).

Theologically, she saw pilgrimage as symbolic of life;

"Christians referred to as sojourners on earth Hebrews 11:13... Augustine described life as a Pilgrimage to the eternal city of God."

The 4th Respondent observed that pilgrimage to Namugongo is faith in a physical place where divine grace is accessed in a very unique and special way and also revealed that as clergy, they usually receive orders from their bishops to go and attend the commemoration.

Respondent 5, a church historical theology scholar argued that syncretism contradicts authentic Christianity. He sees the Namugongo commemoration as historically and theologically significant, grounding Uganda's Christian identity in the sacrifice of the 1886 martyrs and challenging contemporary believers to steadfast faith.

However, he identified emerging syncretic tendencies at the site. A major concern is the elevation of "holy water" (e.g., at Mukajanga), where devotion appears directed toward the water's perceived healing power rather than Christ, effectively displacing God as the object of worship.

Similarly, practices involving statues—such as kissing, offering money, or seeking favors from figures like Mukasa or Kizito—risk idolatry, despite official church teaching that such objects are only memorials. Respondent 5 also highlights moral and behavioral concerns, including commercialization, prostitution, witchcraft, and insincere participation, suggesting that some attendees are driven by motives unrelated to genuine worship.

He critiqued pilgrimage practices that may promote "works-based" spirituality, such as walking long distances for merit, warning that these can replace inward faith with outward performance. While acknowledging that pilgrimage can be a meaningful act of faith if Christ remains central, he cautions against "mystical" interpretations that attribute power to the act itself rather than to God.

On miracles and healing claims, he had a balanced stance that they are biblically valid but must be critically evaluated within a sound theological framework to avoid deception or exaggeration. He stressed that power lies not in objects like water but in God's word and faith. He also pointed out some practices within African Traditional Religion (ATR), noting a cultural tendency toward tangible expressions of spirituality, can influence Christian practice if not properly guided.

He raises concerns about terminology such as "shrine," suggesting it requires careful theological explanation to avoid confusion with pagan worship. Additionally, he warns that increasing state involvement in the commemoration could politicize the event and weaken the church's prophetic voice.

He called for deeper theological teaching, research, and pastoral guidance to preserve the event's true purpose: a memorial that honors the martyrs by encouraging faith in God, not veneration of objects or pursuit of material benefits.

3.1.3 Personal Motivations, Experiences, and Perceived Spiritual Benefits.

Pilgrims described their participation in the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations as driven by faith, remembrance, and personal transformation. Respondent 6 (Anglican) was inspired by the martyrs' profession of faith and described structured activities—arrival and exit protocols, shrine tours, and worship services with national leaders as good and acknowledged benefits such as renewed faith and encouragement through fellowship.

Respondent 7, who attended five times, cited the encouraging story of the faith of the martyrs and valued the presence of people from abroad, though he raised concerns about communal bathing and food shortages. Despite this, he reported answered prayers, stronger faith, and spiritual focus.

Respondent 8 recalled strong organization, security presence, and impactful preaching, noting peace and reduced anxiety. Respondent 9 emphasized “remembrance of those who died for the true religion” and testified, “Namugongo is a very special place where I can call upon God from and he answers,” linking her visits to answered prayers and personal progress. Respondent 10 (Catholic youth) described an educational pilgrimage, stating, “We went as a school... our main purpose was to study about the martyrs,” including exposure to holy water sites and martyrdom history.

Theologians (Respondents 11-14) highlighted worship, repentance, emotional devotion, and fellowship, including learning from international clergy. Quantitatively, 70% reported faith renewal, 45% personal transformation, 40% fellowship, and 35% perseverance modeling. However, practices like collecting water, soil, relics, and tree bark reveal tensions, as some associate spiritual benefits with objects. A Pentecostal respondent admitted previously seeking water blessings but later rejecting object-based faith. Overall, while many experience genuine spiritual growth, the pilgrimage remains vulnerable to syncretic interpretations centered on sacred elements.

3.1.4 Perceptions of Holy Water, Sacred Elements, and Miraculous Claims

Holy water and holy soil-extraction, relics, and tree bark extraction dominated discussions of syncretism among most respondents surveyed.



Pilgrims at Namugongo Anglican martyrs shrine line up in a long line, hustling to fetch holy water at the Mukajanga well.

Stampede as pilgrims fight for Namugongo holy water

The Independent June 4, 2022 NEWS Leave a comment



The man made lake at Namugongo

Kampala, Uganda | THE INDEPENDENT | There was a stampede at the Catholic shrine in Namugongo at the end of the Martyr's day celebrations on Friday afternoon as thousands of pilgrims fought to have at least a drop of water from the man-made lake. Hell broke loose when mass ended at around 1.00pm.

A news

reportage by The Independent of a stampede for holy water in the commemorations



At Namugongo Anglican Shrine, a priest blesses an elderly woman's water as pilgrims place offerings before receiving blessings on fetched holy water.



A female pilgrim humbles for a priest's blessing after fetching holy water, prepares her offering, while other priests bless pilgrims nearby.

Respondent 1 viewed it neutrally if faith-motivated. Respondent 2 insisted that

“Earthly elements have no magical power or mythical impact... What matters more is the motive.”

Respondent 3 warned of idolatry thus;

“Worshipping statues, writing prayer requests, placing money, drinking waters... danger lies in lifting these physical symbols as sacraments” (Exodus 20).

Respondent 5, a scholarly doctor of the church, called for a theology on holy water, tracing it to ATR intermediaries and urging research on experiences vs. Scripture.

Pilgrim’s testimonies revealed divergence.

Respondent 6 rejected allegations of power in the water outright, describing the theories as *“just mere water... deep superstition.”*

Respondent 7 observed that the well from which pilgrims fetch their holy water, *“never dries even in dry seasons... on a dry ground... sifted at its collection point,”* with crowds believing it *“gives blessing, washes away curses and cleanses from sin”* (a belief accruing from the Mukajanga legend that he washed his blood stained garments in the well after killing the martyrs).

Respondent 8 saw faith-dependent benefits via testimonies but has not personally used the water.

Respondent 9 described her profound spiritual experience at the Namugongo Martyrs’ shrine, stating,

“When I reach that place, I feel the presence of God because I have faith that these people died for their Lord.”

She first visited the Catholic shrine in 1996, as the Anglican site was not yet developed. In 1997, she returned with her Catholic husband. Although she personally does not believe in bowing down to idols, she found the gathering powerful, noting that there were prayers morning to evening.

She credited the Catholic Church as the pioneer of the martyr’s event, highlighting that they started the initiative and sang songs such as *Beewaayo*, which means *“they sacrificed themselves for us.”* She observed that while the martyrs were actually killed at the Anglican site, the initial celebrations took place at the Catholic shrine. The Church of Uganda later embraced the commemoration, beginning at the diocesan level

in Namirembe before becoming a provincial event, with prayers, worship, and preaching translated from Luganda into other languages.

The respondent noted significant differences between the two sites: the Anglican commemoration emphasizes rigorous prayer, worship, preaching, and fasting, while the Catholic side features more singing, icon veneration, dancing, and drinking. She also observed the heavy commercial aspect at both sites, with numerous stalls selling food, clothes, books, shoes, and jerrycans, alongside medical services provided by doctors and the Red Cross. Many attendees, she remarked, come for trade and feasting as much as for devotion.

However, she rejected the belief that waters at Mukajanga well contain powers because innocent blood was shed in it. She recounts witnessing bark extraction from a tree where the martyrs were killed. That people harassed the tree too much, expecting healing from there. She narrated the ongoing soil collection at the shrine as people took it to their families.

Respondent 11 was worried about “*fighting for the Mukajanga waters.*” Respondent 14 admitted once fetched 5-liter jerrycans, sprinkled and drunk for three days with “positive results” (pre-conversion) but now rejects. Respondent 18 believed water “*can make people whole... if used with faith.*” Respondent 19 called it “*holy and pure... gives healing.*” Respondent 20 saw constant water level as “wonder” but no power. Respondent 22 viewed it as “natural water.” Respondent 23 (Catholic elder) affirmed blessings via relics, citing a lame youth’s healing and personal land/house prayers after touching relics. Respondent 24 once believed but now prioritizes God.



Pilgrims fetching the Holy water from the Namugongo Anglican Martyrs Shrine

Numerical breakdown: Of 24 respondents, 11 (46%) affirmed or once affirmed supernatural properties (healing, cleansing, protection); 9 (38%) rejected outright; 4

(17%) condition on faith/motive. Miraculous claims (Virgin Mary appearances, healings) were affirmed by 3 (Catholic/former), doubted by 8 (including eyewitness contradictions like Respondent 14's teacher seeing only sun rays), and unaddressed by 13. Respondent 7's well details, Respondent 9's tree history, and Respondent 23's 1969 Pope visit and relic touching enrich the pattern. Respondent 5 noted "faith in intermediaries e.g. holy water, relics, statues, trace it from their ATR cosmology."

3.1.5 Veneration of Statues, Images, Museum, and Relics

Veneration of statues at the shrines and in the museum was observed in the commemoration.



Image 1: A group of women pilgrims adore and pray to a statue of a martyr during the commemoration Image 2: pilgrims reverently venerate the grave of Archbishop Nkoyoyo

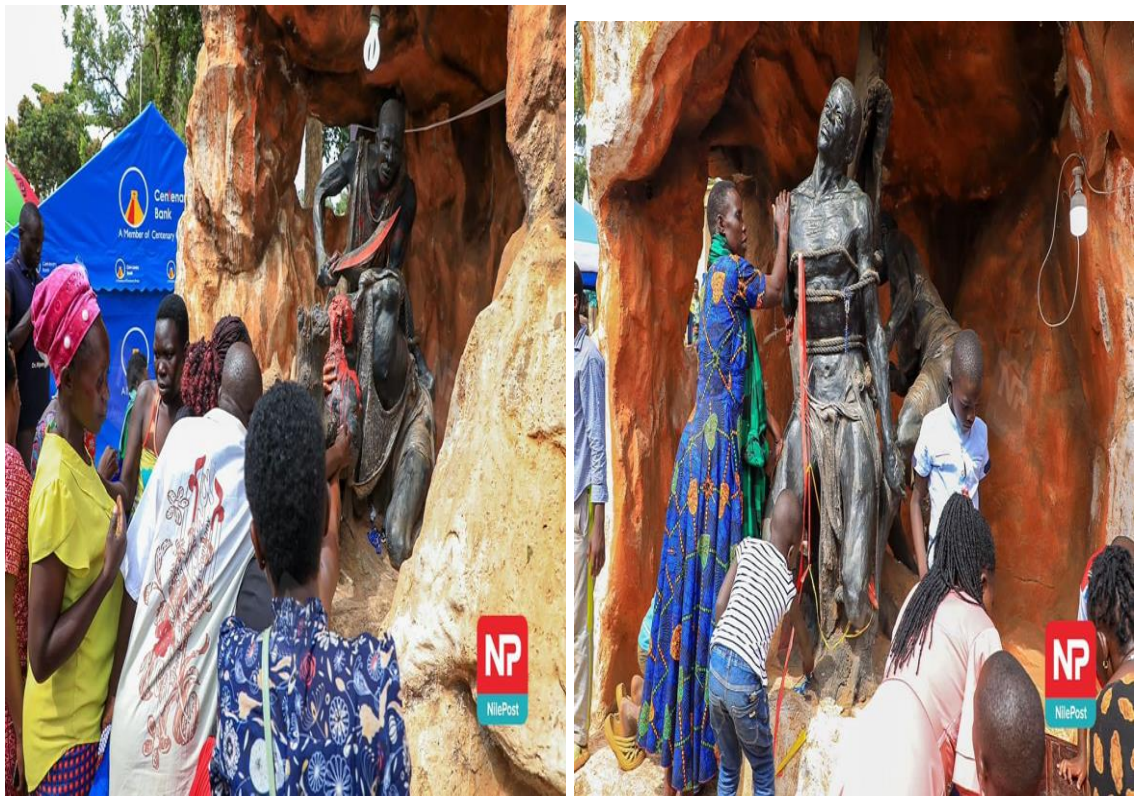
Respondent 3 estimated that 3 out of 10 pilgrims (70%) are always bent on idolatrous intents and purposes.

Respondent 6 a lawyer and a theologian, recounted;

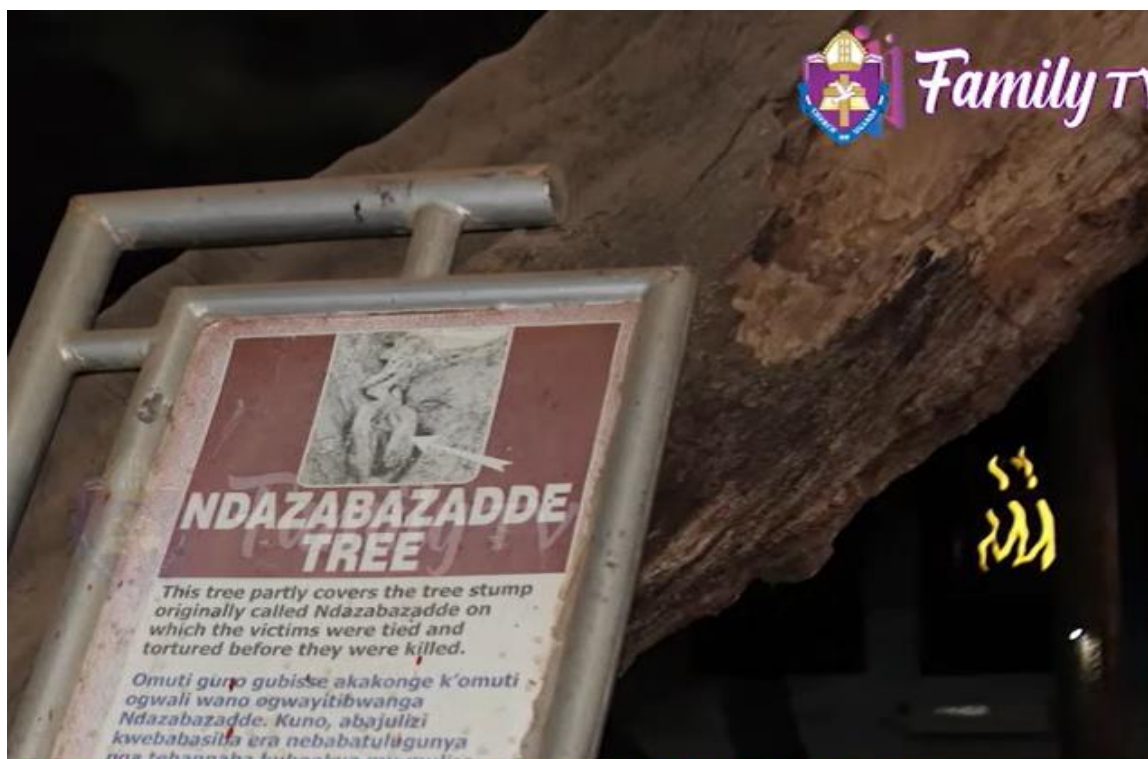
"people bow down and express their feelings. I have observed that emotional temperament always controls people's life when honoring these images...many oilgrims bow down and worship those statues and images Which is equivalent to idolatry, contrary to the Christian teaching of worshipping only one God



A man bows and worships an idol of a martyr at Namugongo (proskynesis)



Pilgrims revere and worship the icons of martyrs at Namugongo



2022 UGANDA MARTYRS DAY UPDATES

THE TORTURE TREE (NDAZABAZADDE)

. At the Anglican martyrs' shrine, pilgrims have long stripped and eaten bark from a martyr tree, drying it; conmen exploit superstition, selling fake bark.



3RD JUNE 2022 UGANDA MARTYRS DAY UPDATES

THE TORTURE TREE (NDAZABAZADDE)

Martyrs' tree artifact; original destroyed by bark harvesting beliefs



Nightfall at Namugongo sees continued martyr icon veneration

Respondent 7 a reflective theologian, expressed concern over excessive postures of bowing before artifacts and fighting for ‘holy water’ at the well, a thing which compelled security agents to swing into action to ensure order in the fetching process.

He stated thus;

“People believe that once they bow to the images of the martyrs, their faith will grow like that of the martyrs. A lot of honor and worship is given to the images other than God whom they should worship. Another observation is that people tend to shift their focus from the Lord their God who is a giver of life and all blessing and put on the dead.”

He mentions describes his entrance into the museum thus;

“The place is decorated by photos of the archbishops and bishops. There are image and statue depictions of the Prison where the martyrs were first arrested from, a place they call ‘under the tree’ where they were killed from, pictures of blood, a mass grave where the ashes of the martyrs were buried.”

There is a mass grave containing relics and remains of the Uganda Martyrs at the Anglican site at Namugongo holds a mass grave where the remains of several martyrs, including those burned on June 3, 1886, were buried, often beneath the site of their execution, which is now commemorated with a memorial as an altar, raised like a holy

table, almost indistinguishable, where majority of pilgrims kneel, pray and lay their offertorings

Respondent 9 described museum:

“images depict harrowing scenes... mats laid... people come and kneel and pray and even place offerings. There is a mass grave constructed to look like an altar table where people kneel, pray and give offerings.”

She says she rejected bowing thus;

“I don’t personally believe in bowing down to idols.”

Respondent 11 also attested to this.

Respondent 22 criticized the “Beewaayo” martyr’s song lyrics as praising martyrs “like Christ.”





A group of pilgrims pray to an icon at Namugongo

- **Museum experiences**



The Anglican martyrs museum was inaugurated by Pope Francis when he visited the country in 2015

Respondent 7 noted somber moods and wailing pilgrims in the museum, images of bloodshed, and use of the martyr's grave as an altar, upon which people kneel, pray and lay offerings. Respondent 8 was terrified by the horrendous sights in the museum.

Respondent 11's experienced transformation in faith. Respondent 23 saw veneration of relics and rosaries for healing. Respondent 5 urged Christ-focus:

"If they need healing, pray for healing such that Christ will reveal himself to them not through trees and statues."

Respondent 12 identified "veneration of the museum objects... and the water point" as syncretic. Respondent 13 recommended the institution of martyrdom theology lessons in all confirmation classes.

Respondent 14, a witness that

"Catholic altar holds some of the bones of the martyrs... people bow down at the altar and cry... record small videos."

Respondent 18 viewed statues as "reminders... not worship."

Respondent 19 called image adoration "unbiblical."



Carrying the relics of the martyrs in procession.

3.1.6 Fanfare, Entertainment, Commercialization, and Politicization

Commercialization and fanfare were widely observed. Respondent 6 witnessed thus

"businessmen and women engage in all activities including selling waragi. There are traditional dances showcased by the Acholi people while there. How can the Christian martyrs be commemorated through such Unchristian commerce and drunkenness,... it does not make any sense."

Respondent 9: stated that the market shifts to the site... food, clothes, books, shoes and jerrycan stalls... treatment points and ambulances.

Respondent 11 mentioned high sales of pork, high secular DJ presence, whores in dark corners. Respondent 14 corroborated this.

Respondent 18 says business boom somehow diverts focus.

Respondent 19 thought that vendors are positive because they bring closer services but are market-like. Respondent 22 regarded the fanfare “more of entertainment than gospels oriented.”

Respondent 6 saw the sermons halted upon the president’s arrival.

Respondent 7 mentioned that government pledges at the commemoration are politicized. Respondent 8 reported security brutality, and discomfort of the common pilgrims by soldiers. Respondent 9 notes that government funding and support multiplied the commemoration’s attendance positively.

Respondent 11 considered presidential pledges as campaigning.

Respondent 12 was concerned that “*state involvement has increasingly turned the event into political capital.*” Respondent 14: politicians could end up “*guiding instead of being guided.*” Respondent 19 recommended reduced speeches.

Numerically, 14/24 (58%) viewed commercialization negatively (distraction, market atmosphere); 9/24 (38%) noted politicization through speeches, pledges, halts, and security dominance. Respondent 9’s 1953 attendance and Pope Paul VI’s 73-hour visit added historical contrast.

3.1. 7 Biblical Soundness, Syncretism, and Church Response

Biblical soundness divided respondents thus:

15/24 (63%) affirmed it as a memorial (Stephen’s day, 2 Timothy 2:2, Hebrews 13:7).

5 rejected the occasion as dead-worship/idolatry.

4 held the meaningfulness of the occasion to be conditional on motive.

Respondent 5 looked at Syncretism as integrating Christian faith with pagan beliefs or pagan lifestyle... neither hot nor cold.

Respondent 12 viewed it as contextualization of the Christian faith to a particular cultural environment.

Respondent 13 viewed syncretism as worshiping of one true God alongside other gods.

The key elements of syncretism that the respondents identified were holy water (most cited, 60%), statues (bowing/kissing), soil/relics, ATR intermediaries.

Respondent 5 said that with *“faith in intermediaries ...people trace it from their ATR cosmology.”* Respondent 12 regarded museum/water points as blending.

Respondent 14 considered his use of holy water in previous times as a syncretic method of worship.

12 Respondents deemed current Church response to syncretic concerns as inadequate

Respondents made the following recommendations Biblical teaching and pastoral ;pilgrim orientation (R12),

Regulation of commerce and politics (R7), Official church verification of allegations of miracles (R3) Restoration of Christ-centered focus (R8). Fasting sessions were recommended by Respondent 24.

Respondent 5 urged the researcher to “do empirical research... compare with Biblical scripture.” Respondent 12 recommended the recognition of more martyrs nationally, not just from a region.

3.1.8 Summary of Data Patterns

The data portray Namugongo as a site of genuine spiritual renewal (70% of attendees) yet rife with syncretic risks (water veneration 46%, statue bowing widely observed, commercialization 58%, politicization 38%). Patterns at Namugongo show tension between heart (motive) (emphasized by 15 respondents) and externals (critiqued by 18).

Verbatim voices stressed the need for authenticity,

“It is all about the heart not the externals” (Respondent 2)

“danger lies in lifting these physical symbols as sacraments” (Respondent 3)

“the object of worship becomes the water” (Respondent 5).

Historical depth (Respondent 23 could clearly recall the 1953 and 1969 commemorations which he attended while young.

Respondent 9’s recounted his tree bark extraction and soil scooping rituals at Namugongo and personal testimonies Respondent 14’s past use of holy water, and Respondent 7’s well-reasoned observations enrich the narrative. These findings reveal syncretism not as isolated but embedded in motive, culture, and practice, demanding theological vigilance. This presentation provides the empirical foundation for Chapter 4’s analysis.

3.2 Interpretation of the data

The data presented in section 3.1 portrays the Namugongo Martyrs commemorations as a site of profound spiritual devotion, historical remembrance, and theological tension. When the researcher interpreted it through the lens of syncretism the blending of Christian practices with non-biblical, indigenous, or culturally adapted elements, the findings demonstrated that the annual 3rd June event functions simultaneously as a powerful expression of Christian faith and a contested arena where biblical purity risks dilution.

This interpretation draws directly from the 24 respondents' voices, patterns, and numerical trends to give rise to four dimensions.

First, pilgrimage as biblically rooted yet historically vulnerable

Personal motivations and spiritual benefits as authentic yet selectively objectified

Thirdly, holy water, statues, relics, and museum practices as primary vectors of syncretic fusion

Fourthly, the commercialization and politicization of the ceremony as contemporary amplifiers of cultural accommodation.

Collectively, these reveal syncretism as an embedded dynamic shaped by motive, ATR cosmology, Catholic devotional traditions, and modern socio-economic pressures. The analysis underscores the Church of Uganda's urgent need for theological vigilance while affirming the event's potential for gospel-centered renewal.

3.2.1 Legitimacy of the Pilgrimage



Kabale pilgrims walk 400 miles; some often die midway due to exhaustion.



A Health Worker Uses The Lunch Time To Stitch or Bandage A Bleeding Feet

A 2025 news reportage on the martyrdom commemoration



A pilgrim with swollen feet

Over 1,500 Pilgrims from Northern Uganda Trek to Namugongo for 2025 Martyrs Day

Published by Francis Oyet on 20 MAY 2025



A Northern Press reportage shows thousands of lay pilgrims walking long distances to Namugongo, some dying en route, while leaders travel by vehicle. Has God required this? (Ps 40:6; 1 Sam 15:22; Isa 1:12). Article 31 of Religion declares Christ's one offering the only satisfaction for sin – not human works or pilgrimages.

Respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 generally viewed the Namugongo pilgrimage as biblically grounded but vulnerable to distortion. Respondent 1 linked it to Abraham's journeys (Hebrews 13) and Helena's 4th-century pilgrimage to Jerusalem, while Respondent 2 connected it to Jewish temple feasts (Deuteronomy 16:16) and the New Testament idea of a heavenly pilgrimage (1 Peter 2:11). Respondent 3 traced the development of pilgrimages from early Christian persecution, Constantine's revival, and medieval indulgences, which were criticized as "shortcuts to heaven" during the Reformation. Respondent 5 urged biblical correction (John 4:21), warning that without proper motive, pilgrimage becomes mere external ritual.

Quantitatively, 8 of 24 respondents (33%) affirmed its biblical validity when motive-driven, while 12 (50%) highlighted historical abuses such as indulgences and relic veneration. Although 70% (16/22) reported faith renewal, 46% (11/24) believed in object-based spiritual power, suggesting syncretic influence. Respondent 1 emphasized growth in faith and unity, but Respondent 2 critiqued benefit-driven eclecticism. Overall, Namugongo reflects the Church's pilgrim identity (Vatican II) but risks medieval-style syncretism unless heart motive (Proverbs 4:23) remains central, aligning with Respondent 3's estimate of 2/10 recognition, 5/10 genuine, and 3/10 idolatrous participation.

3.2.2 Motivations, Experiences, and Spiritual Benefits

Personal testimonies showed the Namugongo commemoration as spiritually transformative while also revealing selective objectification of sacred elements. Respondent 6 highlighted profession of faith and fellowship benefits, Respondent 7 reported answered prayers and strengthened perseverance, and Respondent 9 testified to answered prayers for land and education, collectively reflecting the 70% renewal claims. Respondent 12 described emotional strengthening and deeper devotion, while Respondent 14 emphasized a profound spiritual encounter. Overall, benefits were most frequently linked to reflection (12 respondents) and fellowship (9 respondents), with only 35% explicitly connecting the experience to martyrs' perseverance, suggesting that communal worship outweighs relic-focused devotion, especially in Anglican practice.

A tension emerged in the data as 63% (15/24) regarded the event as a biblically valid memorial (Hebrews 13:7; 2 Timothy 2:2), yet 46% still attributed spiritual effects to physical objects. Respondent 14 illustrates transformation from earlier water-based practices with perceived "results" to Christ-centered faith (Hebrews 11:1). Respondent 9's long-term participation links outcomes to prayer rather than magic.

However, accounts such as Respondent 7's highlight of the never-drying Maukajanga well and Respondent 23's relic-touching healings reveal how ATR cosmology reframes martyrdom symbols into talismans (Respondent 5), drawing parallels with Naaman and the pool of Siloam. While 38% (9/24) rejected object-based power, mainly Anglicans

and Pentecostals, Catholic and former Catholic narratives show acceptance. Although motivations are largely faith-driven (70% renewal), syncretism emerges where water, soil, or statues replace Christ as the source of grace, with over 60% of discussions focusing on such elements.

3.2.3 Holy Water, Statues, Relics, and Museum Practices: Primary Vectors of Syncretism

Holy water, statues, relics, and museum practices emerged as the strongest vectors of syncretism at Namugongo. Of 24 respondents, over 60% discussed holy water, while 46% (11/24) attributed to it supernatural powers such as healing, cleansing, and protection. Respondent 7 observed:

“Surprisingly, Mukajanga well never dries... its water appears sifted... it gives blessing, washes away curses.”

In contrast, Respondent 9 rejected its sanctification, arguing that a site associated with innocent blood should be blocked, making Mukajanga well a contested sacred space. Respondent 5 linked such practices to ATR cosmology of intermediaries, while Respondent 2 emphasized motive, interpreting water veneration as a pagan-Christian fusion. Respondent 14’s testimony of fetching, sprinkling, and drinking water for perceived results, later abandoned, shows a personal syncretic trajectory, while Respondent 23 extended belief to relic-touching and healing claims.

Statues and museum practices reinforce this pattern. Respondent 6 noted bowing behaviour, Respondent 9 described grave sites used as altars where “people come and kneel and pray and even place offerings,” and Respondent 14 referenced bone-veneration videos, blurring respect (“dulia”) into idolatry (Exodus 20; Respondent 3). Respondent 12 identified museums and water points as syncretic spaces, Respondent 13 called for stronger doctrinal teaching, and Respondent 22 criticized martyr-focused songs. Quantitatively, statue bowing was observed in 42% (10/24), with 3/10 motives classified as idolatrous (Respondent 3). Overall, these practices merge Christian remembrance with ATR ancestor veneration and Catholic relic theology, producing hybrid spirituality. Respondent 5 warned that healing should come through prayer alone, not “trees and statues,” highlighting the displacement of Christ. The data show syncretism operating through object-mediated grace, challenging sola fide and solus Christus.

3.2.4 Commercialization, Politicization, and Fanfare

Commercialization and politicization are viewed as contemporary extensions of syncretism at Namugongo.

A total of 58% (14/24) respondents criticized commercialization. Respondent 6 cited waragi and prostitution, Respondent 9 noted the shift into market activity, Respondent

11 pointed to the invasion of DJs and countless sex workers, and Respondent 14 mentioned pork sales and secular music.

Although Respondent 19 viewed vendors positively, 38% (9/24) highlighted politicization, including presidential interruption of sermons (Respondent 6), campaigning and pledges (Respondent 11), and heavy security presence (Respondent 8), Respondent 12 described state partnership as political capital, while Respondent 14 argued that at times, politicians guide instead of being guided, indicating a shift from spiritual to political focus.

Fanfare and entertainment were seen ambivalently. Respondent 18, viewed them as promoting unity, while 58% criticized them as distractions. These dynamics blend sacred remembrance with economic and political interests, echoing medieval indulgence-era commerce and immorality in pilgrimages.

Respondent 9 contrasted the commemoration at its inception (1953-1969) with today's commercialization, while Respondent 22's critique of lyrics reflects cultural dilution. Overall, these trends commodify martyrdom, subordinating worship to market forces and political visibility.



In the picture above, men purchase jerrycans for collecting holy water at the shrines.



Locals drink in bar during Martyrs' Day; some unaware of its meaning.



Pilgrims guzzling Malwa brew in communal drinking pots during Namugongo Martyrs Day.



Man slaughters pig on bare ground in Namugongo during Martyrs Day celebrations.



Namugongo Pilgrims commemorate Martyrs Day in bars instead of attending prayers.

3.2.5 Biblical Soundness, Church Response, and Implications for Syncretism

63% (15/24) affirmed the commemoration as a biblically valid memorial event, yet over 50% of theologians surveyed warned against misuse. Respondent 5's "neither hot nor

cold” and Respondent 12 affirmed the existence of lukewarm religious blending in the commemoration current Church response to syncretism in the event was judged inadequate by 12 respondents, with equal calls for biblical teaching and orientation (12/24 each), revealing a gap between prevailing commemorative practice and reformed theology. Respondent 5 proposed urged further empirical research.

Overall, findings show Namugongo as spiritually transformative for many (70% renewal), yet compromised and syncretical, due to existence of ATR object-power, relic veneration, and commercial-political influences overshadowing Christ.

Syncretism in Namugongo appeared in pilgrim’s motive shift (heart to externals), object belief (46% holy water, soil, bark, relics, and icons), and commercialization (58%) which reflects historical parallels with medieval indulgences and challenges sola scriptura. However, 38% rejection of object-faith and calls for teaching suggest corrective potential. The data call for stronger catechesis, motive discernment, and the development of Christ-centered martyrdom commemoration liturgy in the Church of Uganda.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Respondents 1-5 (theologians and clergy) affirmed pilgrimage as biblically grounded, citing Abrahamic journeys, Jewish convocations to Jerusalem for temple feasts, Hebrews 11:13; 13:14; 1 Peter 2:11, and its historical continuity through Helena’s fourth-century pilgrimages and early Christian *martyria*. Respondent 1 further referenced Vatican II’s description of the Church as a pilgrim people, noting benefits such as contemplation, unity, and deepened faith. Respondent 3 estimated that five out of ten pilgrims attend for genuine causes. These findings align with the early Church pattern discussed in (2.16), where martyr commemorations fostered edification and imitation of Christ’s passion.

However, the data also reveals syncretic distortions more so when pilgrimage shifts from encounter with God to reliance on tangible created mediators. Respondent 2 emphasized inward motive (heart, not externals) and warned against blending ATR sentences with Christian pilgrimage. Respondent 5 similarly linked dependence on intermediaries to ATR cosmology. This reflects Chapter Two’s critique of false conceptions of God (2.6(a)) and invented modes of worship (2.6(b)).

Notably, 46% of respondents (11/24) affirmed or previously affirmed supernatural efficacy in holy water, relics, or soil, effectively “forging Christ” and “stripping him of his offices” (2.6(a)) by assigning mediating power to objects. This mirrors Exodus 32:4-5, where the golden calf was called “your gods... who brought you up out of Egypt” while still claiming worship of Yahweh. The evidence therefore confirms idolatrous

syncretism, where pilgrimage, though valid in principle, becomes for a significant minority a practice of creaturely mediation.

4.1.3 Motivations, Experiences, and Perceived Spiritual Benefits- Heart versus Externals

Seventy percent of attendees surveyed (16/22) reported having their faith strengthened, prayers answered and spirits renewed. When grounded in reflection on the martyrs' Christ-centered witness, these outcomes align with Tertullian's assertion that *the blood of Christians is the seed of the church*, and Augustine's teaching in *City of God* XXII.10 that thanksgiving must be directed to God alone. Respondent 9's testimony of prayers answered for land and education, and Respondent 7's experience of perseverance inspired by the martyrs, reflect authentic edification where the heart remains focused on Christ.

However, the findings also reveal a problematic shift when spiritual benefits are sought through created objects. Respondent 14's pre-conversion use of holy water, described as producing positive results (later abandoned after conversion), reflects ATR-influenced witchcraft and fetishistic worldviews. Similarly, Respondent 23's reports of healing through touching relics illustrate the good motives of no significance critique developed in the foundations (2.6-2.7). Even sincere intention does not justify idolatrous means.

William Perkins and the Reformers maintain that *good motives... are of no significance* in idolatrous syncretism. The fact that 45% of respondents attribute answered prayers to objects such as holy water, soil, or bark indicates a form of practical Pelagianism—human merit and self-sufficiency (2.6(a))—which undermines Christ's exclusive priesthood. While, at times, God may graciously answer prayers, “winking at times of ignorance” (Acts 17:30), Scripture also warns against misattributing divine acts to idols, as in Hosea 2:8-9, where Israel fails to recognize God as the true giver of grain, wine, oil, and wealth.

Respondent 5's observation that pilgrims draw on ATR mediation patterns confirms cultural fusion. In Buganda and other Ugandan contexts, ancestral veneration and sacred objects merge with Christian commemoration, producing the hybrid religiosity warned against in (2.2), driven by cultural value, ethnicity, and the search for quick healing.

Overall, while 63% (15/24) regard the commemoration as a legitimate biblical memorial (Hebrews 13:7; 2 Timothy 2:2), the object-dependent minority demonstrates underlying idolatrous syncretism, wherein God's glory is transferred to creatures (2.11) and sacred places are idolized.

4.1.4 Holy Water, Statues, Images, Museum Practices, and Relics: Primary Vectors of Idolatrous Syncretism

Holy water emerged as the most frequently cited syncretic element, discussed by over 60% of respondents, with 46% saying it possesses supernatural efficacy. Respondent 7's account of the never-drying Mukajanga well, where crowds believe the water washes away curses and cleanses from sin, and even fight to obtain it, directly parallels the ritual lustration and apotropaic practices critiqued in (2.19) as non-biblical accretions.

Chapter Two traces such practices to pagan purification rites, misreadings of Jewish traditions, and post-Constantinian developments, later rejected by Reformers such as Calvin in his *Treatise on Relics* and Puritan sermons. Respondent 5 explicitly connected these beliefs to ATR intermediary cosmologies. This constitutes idolatrous syncretism where water—biblically restricted to baptism and spiritual signification (2.22)—is transformed into a mediator with inherent power, violating 1 John 5:21 and the jealousy of God (2.7).

Veneration of statues, images, and museum spaces was equally pronounced, as corroborated by field photographs collected during the 2025 commemorations. Respondent 6 identified acts of bowing before statues and images as idolatrous worship. Respondent 9 described kneeling at mass-grave altars, placing offerings, and praying before depictions of martyrdom. Respondent 14 observed martyrs' bones in the Catholic shrine altar attracting mass prostrations and continuous video-recorded veneration. Respondent 3 estimated that 3 out of 10 pilgrims engage in such practices.

These actions meet the criteria of idolatrous syncretism outlined in (2.4-2.5): images intended as representations become idols (Deuteronomy 4:15-16), function as “teachers of lies” (2.9), provoke divine jealousy (2.8), and resemble worship offered to demonic powers disguised as devotion to God. The museum, originally designed for education, has increasingly assumed the character of a *locus sanctus*, echoing pagan hero-cults condemned in (2.6.(b)) and countered by early Church reforms such as Ambrose's correction of Monica and Epiphanius' destruction of idol curtains. Respondent 22 further critiqued “Beewaayo” lyrics that elevate martyrdom to Christ's level, thus attributing divine glory to creatures (2.11).

Relic veneration intensifies this pattern. Practices such as scooping and eating soil from shrine grounds., and extracting bark from martyr trees for healing mirror the cult of relics critiqued by Professor Mwambutsya Ndebesa and discussed in (2.15.4). Reformers such as Luther called such practices “the greatest lies,” while Calvin described them as “useless and frivolous... leading towards idolatry.”

Respondent 23's testimony of the 1969 relic-touching healings, and Respondent 9's eyewitness account of soil-eating and bark consumption, confirm this trend. With 42%

observing statue bowing and a significant minority attributing intrinsic power to the site, the findings align with historical condemnations from Hieria (754), Elvira (305-306), Frankfurt (794), and patristic authorities such as Augustine and Jerome. The evidence therefore substantiates high-level idolatrous syncretism at Namugongo.

4.1. 5 Commercialization, Fanfare, Entertainment, and Politicization: Modern Fuels of Syncretism

Fifty-eight percent (14/24) of respondents critically identified commercialization, citing waragi sales, pork consumption, secular DJs, prostitution, and shifting market stalls around the shrine (Respondents 6, 9, 11). A further 38% (9/24) highlighted politicization, noting that the arrival of political dignitaries' interrupts sermons and altar proceedings, introduces security dominance, and carries subtle campaigning undertones (Respondents 6, 11, 12). Respondent 22 further observed that some musical performances, particularly cultural displays, function more as entertainment than gospel proclamation.

These findings correspond closely with the syncretism-fuelling dynamics outlined in (2.3), especially economic pressures, cosmopolitan influences, and a tolerance-driven policy framework that prioritizes public harmony. As previously warned, when the gospel displaces traditional structures without adequate transformation, syncretism fills the resulting vacuum, as seen in African Independent Church developments. Commercialization thus reduces martyrdom to a commodity and spectacle, contrasting sharply with early Church practices of solemn Eucharistic remembrance and almsgiving (2.17).

Politicization also compromises worship by aligning ecclesial space with state authority, echoing Jeroboam's politicized use of golden calves (2.6(a)). Meanwhile, fanfare and cultural dances introduce untransformed pagan elements, violating safeguards articulated by Ambrose against revelry reminiscent of pagan feasts such as Parentalia (2.17). Overall, the data demonstrate that these forces intensify syncretism by gradually diluting the Church's prophetic witness and spiritual integrity (Engel, 1979, cited in 1.1.0).

4.3 Overall Substantiation of Syncretism

Measuring the data against Chapter Two's yardstick and the literature yields an unequivocal conclusion: syncretism is not marginal but embedded and, in some respects, high-end at Namugongo. Holy water, relics, statues, museum veneration, and object-mediated benefits constitute idolatrous syncretism as defined by Perkins (2.4-2.5), the biblical canon (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 4; 1 John 5:21), church fathers (Augustine, Epiphanius), councils (Elvira, Hieria), and Reformers and Puritans.

Risks of growing commercialization and politicization supply the economic-political fuels for syncretism identified in 2.2. While 70% renewal and 63% memorial legitimacy show the event's potential for gospel good, the 46% object-power belief, 42% observed bowing, and widespread externals-focus reveal a practical displacement of Christ—precisely the '*mother of all wickedness*' and provocation of divine judgment catalogued in 2.13 (Hosea's prophecy applied to the Church). The findings align with Mwambutsya Ndebesa's (2014) and Josue Okoth's (2019) concerns cited in 1.1.0 and confirm the problem statement's hypothesis of deviation from authentic Christianity.

4.4 Strategies for Combatting and Addressing Syncretism

Drawing directly from Chapter Two's foundations, the Church can implement the following biblically grounded, historically proven, and pastorally realistic measures:

1. Robust Catechesis on Martyrdom Theology (2.11). The church can Integrate a scriptural theology of martyrdom into confirmation classes, schools of ministry, and pilgrim orientation programs (as urged by Respondents 5, 12, 13). We are to teach the early-church model that martyrs are witnesses to be imitated, not mediators to be invoked (Augustine, City of God XXII.10). Motive self-examination should be emphasized in commemoration (Proverbs 4:23; Respondent 2) and the sufficiency of Christ (2.6(a)).
2. Pastoral Leadership and Prophetic Voice (2.13). There is a need for Bishops and clergy to publicly address syncretism as Ambrose' correction to Monica and Augustine helped reform Hippo from pagan syncretism. Diocesan guidelines prohibiting bowing, veneration offerings, or relic-touching at the museum may be issued. Distribution of holy water should be addressed and devotion redirected exclusively to God through preaching, Eucharist, and almsgiving.
3. There is a need for regulation of Site Practices and Commercial Activity (2.12) after the Nehemiah 3:19 model. There is a need to limit museums to educational exhibits without altar-like veneration. There is a need to ban commercial stalls selling waragi, pork, or secular entertainment within shrine precincts or vicinity and replace fanfare with solemn edifying activity, to mirror early-church safeguards against revelry. The assistance of rulers may also be sought in this.
4. There is a need for an inspired liturgical reform (2.22). Reformational principles like the removal of images/relics that risk *dulia-latria* confusion (Calvin), confinement of water use in worship to sacramental baptism alone; re-emphasis of sola scriptura, solus Christus, sola fide. There is need for adoption of the 2Kings 18:4 Hezekiah model, who destroyed the Nehushtan (the bronze serpent of Moses) in Jerusalem as part of his sweeping religious reforms to eliminate idolatry and broke it into pieces, contemptuously calling it 'Nehushtan' (a mere piece of brass) because the Israelites had been burning incense to it as a god.

The Josiah model in 2 Kings 23 and 2 Chronicles 34, who enacted sweeping religious reforms in Judah after the Book of the Law was found in the Temple. He renewed the national covenant with God, destroyed idolatrous altars, shrines, and high places, executed pagan priests, and reinstated the Passover celebration, turning back to God with all his heart

The Assa model in 1 Kings 15:13, 2 Chronicles 14:3, and 2 Chronicles 15:16, who destroyed the detestable Asherah pole created by his grandmother Maacah and other idols by cutting them down and burning them in the Kidron Valley near Jerusalem to signify a complete rejection of idolatry in Judah.

The Jehu model in 2 Kings 10:23-28, who eradicated Baal worship in Israel by tricking all of Baal's prophets, priests, and worshippers into gathering at the temple of Baal for a massive sacrifice, then ordering his guards to kill them all. He further destroyed the sacred pillars, burned the temple, and converted it into a latrine. While this may not be on all fours with the issues at hand, it provides some direction.

The Gideon model in Judges 6, who destroyed his father's altar to Baal, built an altar to the Lord. These can be adopted with modifications adopted to the context.

Christ- centered panegyrics and orations can be maintained and concentrated in the martyrdom commemoration in tandem with the practice of the first church, that was most pure and undefiled.

5. Ecumenical and National Collaboration should be approached with Safeguards Anglican-Catholic cooperation is positive for unity, but must be governed by shared scriptural criteria. Engage the government to reduce politicization while retaining national holiday status—ensuring that only the Church, not the state, defines the event's theological character.

6. Monitoring, Research, and Ongoing Reformation. There is a need to establish a joint Anglican-Catholic theological commission for annual review (building on Respondent 5's empirical call). Encourage further research comparing Namugongo with early-church and Reformation models. Preach regularly against idolatrous syncretism using the dangers outlined in (2.12) (exhaustion of mercy, national calamity, spiritual paralysis) since we all belong to Christ and are subject to his saving word.

Implementation of these strategies, rooted in Scripture, reason and church tradition in conciliar precedents, and Reformation theology, will realign the Namugongo commemorations with their original purpose of corporate reflection on the faith and exemplary witness of the martyrs, watering the seed of the gospel without compromising doctrinal integrity of the church.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of key findings and achievement of Objectives

The study set out to trace the theological and historical meaning and roots of religious syncretism (Objective 1), identify its elements in the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations (Objective 2), and establish ways of effectively addressing it (Objective 3). Chapter Two fulfilled Objective 1 by demonstrating that syncretism is the illegitimate blending of non-Christian elements with Christian faith, and that when it involves the ascription of divine honor or efficacy to creatures, it becomes idolatrous syncretism—a violation of the First and Second Commandments, provoking God’s jealousy and inviting judgment. Biblical examples (golden calf, Jeroboam’s calves), patristic warnings, conciliar decrees (Elvira, Hieria), early-church safeguards, and Reformation/Puritan critiques provided an unassailable yardstick.

Chapter Three’s field data (24 respondents) and Chapter Four’s analysis fulfilled Objective 2 by substantiating that Namugongo exhibits high-end idolatrous syncretism. Holy water veneration (46% affirming supernatural power), statue bowing and museum altar-like practices (42% observed), relic/soil/bark collection, and commercialization/fanfare/politicization (58% and 38% critiqued) constitute the ascription of God’s glory to creatures, the invention of strange means of worship, and cultural-economic fuels precisely which are contrary to the foundations. While 70% of pilgrims experience genuine renewal and 63% affirm the event as legitimate memorial, the object-mediated devotion and externals-focus reveal a practical displacement of Christ, echoing medieval abuses prior warned against by Ambrose, Augustine, and afterwards, the Reformers.

Objective 3 is addressed in Chapter Four’s strategies and the recommendations below. The study therefore concludes that the Namugongo martyrdom commemorations, though born of noble intent to honor the example of the Uganda Martyrs and strengthen faith, have deviated into syncretism that compromises core authentic Christianity. Without decisive intervention, the event risks exhausting God’s mercy, blinding the Church, and paralyzing spiritual progress (2.13).

5.2 Theological and Pastoral Implications

The findings reaffirm the centrality of Christ and the gospel within Anglican (and broader Christian) theology. Martyrdom commemoration must remain Christocentric—pointing pilgrims to the One for whom the martyrs died—rather than creature-centered, *‘for all men are like grass’* and *‘an idol is nothing in the world’*. The data expose the human heart as the perennial *factory of idols* and the necessity for constant vigilance. For the Church of Uganda, this study underscores the urgency of doctrinal integrity amid cultural- religious pluralism and state involvement. Failure to address syncretism

will undermine the very legacy the martyrs sealed with their blood- exclusive allegiance to Christ till death.

5.3 Recommendations

The following recommendations flow directly from the theological foundations, literature, and empirical findings:

1. Pastoral and Liturgical Reforms

The church of the province of Uganda and the Roman Catholic Church need to jointly come up with binding guidelines prohibiting idolatrous syncretic practices like bowing to images, offerings on graves, or relic-touching at the museum and shrines. Holy water collection should cease because it has no scriptural sanctioning.

There is a need to regulate and replace fanfare and secular entertainment with edifying programs. Pre-pilgrimage catechesis should be adopted in all participating churches on the biblical theology of martyrdom and the dangers of idolatrous syncretism.

2. Theological Education and Formation

A module on Martyrdom theology needs to be adopted in all theology teaching institutions like Uganda Christian University, and its affiliate colleges and in confirmation curricula.

Production and dissemination of accessible literature and sermons (in English and local languages) to enlighten the masses on true worship.

Train pilgrim guides and museum staff to direct visitors exclusively to Christ-centered reflection.

3. Structural and Regulatory Measures

The Anglican Martyrs' site should be renamed, and the term "shrine" replaced with a more appropriate designation for the sake of clarity. In the understanding of the average African layperson, a "shrine" carries strong negative connotations – it is commonly perceived as a house of demons or a place associated with spirits in African Traditional Religion (ATR). Even its deeper theological meaning as the dwelling place of a deity is largely unknown to most pilgrims. It should not be forgotten that the majority of those who attend the annual commemoration are ordinary lay men and women. Continuing to use the term "shrine" risks misleading them into believing that the Anglican Church endorses the establishment and maintenance of shrines, a practice deeply rooted in African Traditional Religion. A more biblically appropriate and less ambiguous name would help prevent such theological confusion.

Given that the doctrine of the Anglican Church does not approve the use of holy water as a medium of worship or prayer, her continued maintenance and distribution of it to masses, amounts to offering strange fires before the Lord. The argument that Anglicans don't drink the water does not suffice to warrant the maintenance of the well, because pictures obtained from the site show Anglican clergy fetching, and even blessing the same. The church leadership should seriously and urgently consider sealing off the Mukajanga well permanently because it has no provision even in the liturgy. The site is become a significant stumbling block for many ignorant souls and a high place of idolatry.

As Scripture warns,

"You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:14).

Similarly, the prophet declares,

"Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way" (Isaiah 57:14).

Ministers actively involved in the ministry of healing and deliverance might appreciate how so-called 'holy water' often serves as a medium for demonic infiltration among those who use it. Just as Moses destroyed the golden calf and King Hezekiah destroyed Nehushtan – the bronze serpent originally made by Moses – the church can well do without this well in order to maintain undivided focus on Christ alone. Lining up for water at the Anglican site should be prohibited, and the well should be cordoned off or permanently sealed.

All artifacts, icons, and statues depicting the Uganda Martyrs should be removed, as this study has demonstrated that they are already being treated as objects of worship. The church has no biblically justifiable reason to retain them. The divine mandate to uphold purity of worship and exclusive devotion to Jehovah far outweighs any commitment to preserving antiquities or cultural heritage. Idolatry leads countless souls to damnation, whereas the aesthetic beauty and historical splendor of human art and artifacts – however admired by the gazing crowds – have no power to save anyone.

The church leadership should seriously consider discontinuing veneration at the martyrs' grave located in the small chapel annexed to the museum and at Archbishop Nkoyoyo's grave. A large number of pilgrims can be seen bowing down and prostrating before the "holy table" like shaped martyrs' grave, and they lay offertories directly on it, treating the dead as they would treat God. This is done largely out of ignorance, the guides never inform them, and the feature is a stumbling block to many believers. Most pilgrims are unaware that they are actually kneeling on a grave, worshiping and

sacrificing to the dead. This form of veneration at gravesites is rooted in African Traditional Religion rather than authentic Christian teaching and should therefore be discontinued.

There is a need to establish a permanent Joint Anglican-Catholic Theological Oversight Committee for Namugongo to monitor practices annually and report to the House of Bishops and Catholic Bishops' Conference, if this ecumenical effort is achievable. If not achievable, the Church of Uganda needs to be prepared to walk this journey alone, with a decision to follow Jesus not idols.

Concerned officers of the church might need to consider discussions with the government to retain the public holiday while reducing on political speeches and pledges during core worship times.

Rulers and church leaders should work together to regulate commercialization, by confining vending activity to designated areas outside site precincts and ban alcohol, secular music and night time prostitution within the sites and the vicinity.

4. Long-term Vision and Research

Re-envision the commemoration as a National Day of Gospel-centered reflection, fasting, and charity—celebrating the martyrs' witness without object veneration.

Encourage further empirical and comparative research on martyrdom commemorations across Africa to strengthen continental theological reflection.

Pray for and pursue the spiritual renewal of the Church so that Namugongo becomes a beacon of Reformation fidelity rather than a cautionary tale of idolatrous syncretism.

5.4 Conclusion

The Uganda Martyrs accepted to shed their blood out of faithfulness to the unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ that was once and for all handed down to the saints. The greatest honor which the contemporary church can give them is not to elevate them to the place of God most High, who made them and all, but instead to preserve pure and unmixed, that faith once handed down to the saints, for which they died. This study has demonstrated that idolatrous syncretism in Namugongo is alive and well, and has also shown the way forward, from Scripture, reason and authentic apostolic Christian tradition. May the Church of Uganda and her sister churches, empowered by the same Spirit that sustained the martyrs, rise to this challenge, repent where necessary, and restore the martyrdom commemoration to its rightful place as a powerful testimony to the exclusive unequalled preciousness and lordship of Christ, for the glory of God and the strengthening of His people. Amen.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Work plan

<u>TIME-FRAME</u>	<u>ACTIVITY</u>
October 2025 _____	Conducting of interviews
November- December 2025 _____	Giving out and collecting of questionnaires
January - February 2026 _____	Analysing, compiling of the information
March- April- Revisions and corrections	
April 2026 _____	Printing, binding and submission of the research

Appendix 2: Letter of Approval for Data Collection



**UGANDA CHRISTIAN
UNIVERSITY**

A Centre of Excellence in the Heart of Africa

15th March 2024

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Dear Sir/Madam

INTRODUCTION LETTER FOR DATA COLLECTION

This letter serves to introduce to you RWANGOGA DANIEL a student of Bishop Tucker School of Divinity pursuing a Master of Divinity/ Master of Arts in Theology/ Master of Arts in Theology and Development/Master of Arts in Theology and Health care Management/ Bachelors of Divinity.

His/her is carrying out a research as a partial requirement for him/her to be awarded the degree he/she is pursuing. So kindly avail him or the required information for building his/her research work.

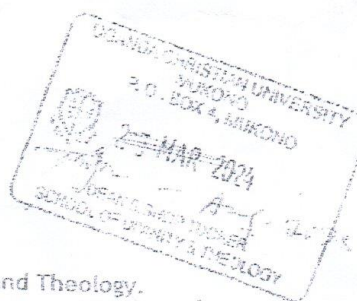
Counting on your cooperation and thank you in advance

Yours faithfully

Rev. Prof. Elly Kansiime

Research coordinator, Bishop Tucker School of Divinity and Theology.

ekansiime@ucc.ac.ug 0772621187



Appendix 3 Data Collection Tools

A 3.1 Questionnaire for Pilgrims

SYNCRETISM IN THE NAMUGONGO MARTYRDOM COMMEMORATIONS

DATA COLLECTION TOOL FOR PARTICIPATING PILGRIMS

Name _____.

Age_____.

Gender_____.

Region/District of origin_____.

Denomination _____.

How many times have you attended Namugongo Martyrs Day? (tick)

Once_____

2-5 times._____

More than 5 times._____

Do you come to Namugongo individually or as a group?

_____.

By what means of travel do you usually get to Namugongo for the commemorations? (tick whichever is applicable)

Vehicle_____.

walking_____.

What mostly inspires you to be a part of the Uganda martyr's pilgrimage annually?

In brief, can you describe what happened from your time of arrival to your time of departure from the Martyr's site?

What spiritual benefits do you believe you receive in your pilgrimage?

Have you been to the well of Mukajanga during the martyrs' commemorations? (tick whichever is applicable)

Yes_____. No_____.

State your personal observations?

Do you personally believe that water fetched from Mukajanga well or the martyrs' lake has any supernatural power? Yes_____. No_____. If yes, Why?

Have you observed people bow to the image of martyrs? Yes_____ No_____ (tick whichever is applicable) If yes, state your observations.

Have you ever entered the martyrs' museum? Yes_____ No_____.

State and explain your observations

Are there practices in the martyr's commemoration which you think contradict Christian teaching? Yes_____ No_____ (tick) If yes, Explain.

Before you set off from home church to the martyr's pilgrimage, is there any kind of guidance or orientation that you receive from your pastor? Yes_____ None_____. (tick) If yes, explain

Do you think pilgrims need any form of orientation or guidance before visiting the martyrs' site? Yes_____. No_____. If yes, what kind of guidance do pilgrims need and why?

Do you think the commemoration event is biblically right? If sound, Why?

If not sound, in your view, what can the Church do to ensure that the event remains biblical sound?

In short, describe your spiritual journey and how the Namugongo pilgrimage aids it.

What expectations—spiritual, emotional, or material—motivate your participation in the martyrdom commemorations?

Which locations or features of the martyrs' site feel most spiritually significant to you whenever you visit and why?

Locations _____

Features. _____

Why?

Have you personally ever sought healing or protection through the martyrs' water, soil, statues and relics? Yes_____. No_____. elaborate.

In your view, why do some pilgrims collect water at the Mukajanga well?

Comment on the alleged miraculous appearances at the Namugongo Catholic martyrs' shrine.

Have you witnessed any pilgrims venerating martyr's statues or graves?

What beliefs do you hold about the "power" in the water, soil, and images at the martyrs' site?

Have you witnessed any priests blessing water and collecting money from the fetchers at the Mukajanga well? Yes_____ No_____. If yes, describe the incident.

Do you think it is right? Yes_____. No_____. Give reasons

Have you personally observed any fanfare, entertainment, or commercial activities at the martyrs site during the commemoration season? Yes_____ No_____. If yes, describe.

How do these affect your pilgrimage?

What worship practices at the Namugongo martyrs' commemoration contradict biblical teaching? Explain your judgment.

Have you observed any political figures take advantage of the martyrdom commemoration for their political visibility or campaigns? Yes_____. No_____. If so, Describe what you witnessed.

In your opinion, does the involvement of politicians derail the spiritual focus of the event? Yes_____. No_____. If so, how?

Have political speeches, symbols, or activities in any way disrupted or overshadowed the commemoration worship proceedings? Yes_____. No_____. If so, how?

Do pilgrims or clergy express any political expectations tied to the event like promises, endorsements and financial handouts?

What steps should be taken to protect the commemoration from politicisation?

What changes can the Church leadership make in the commemorations?

A 3.2 Questionnaire for Church Scholars

SYNCRETISM IN THE NAMUGONGO MARTYRDOM COMMEMORATIONS **DATA COLLECTION TOOL FOR CHURCH SCHOLARS**

1. Name_____.
2. Address_____.
2. Scholarly discipline/ specialization_____
3. How do you understand syncretism?_____
4. Do the ongoing acts of statue veneration at Namugongo martyrdom commemorations amount _____ to _____ syncretism?_____
5. In your view, what other aspects of the martyrdom commemoration amount to syncretism?_____
6. What dangers does syncretism in the martyrdom commemorations pose to the church?_____
3. Some persons have alleged miraculous occurrences at the martyrdom event, how may this phenomenon be theologically evaluated?_____
4. Comment on the assertion that the martyrdom commemoration is increasingly being politicised and commercialized._____
7. Evaluate ritual use of water use, soil, bark extraction, and relics veneration by pilgrims at the martyrdom site from a biblical doctrinal standpoint._____
8. What might be the root causes of syncretic practices in the Namugongo martyrs' event?_____
8. What changes can the Church consider in this respect?_____
9. How does involvement of politicians in the Uganda martyrs event affect the spiritual focus of the event?_____

Daniel Rwangoga

**SYNCRETISM IN THE NAMUGONGO MARTYRDOM
COMMEMORATIONS**



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