

# Occurrence of Religiosity in the Malawi Public Sector: An Analysis of Perceptions of Key Stakeholders

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**Abstract:** This study analyses the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the occurrence of religiosity in the public sector in Malawi. It comes on the backdrop of mounting interest in workplace religiosity and spirituality globally, which is attributable to such touted benefits as improved employee performance. However, the study and practice of religiosity, a concept which in this study subsumes the concept of spirituality, has been limited to private organizations due to the western ideals of church-state separation. Within Malawi though, which in this matter is a microcosm of the African context, such principles are not entertained. This offers an opportunity to explore and leverage religion's purported potential, to address performance deficiencies and other challenges in this region's government sector. As such, the perception of key stakeholders regarding the occurrence of religiosity in the public workplace may be of critical importance as it may influence the acceptance, retention, and even exploitation of the concept to the benefit of the sector. However, there appear to be no such studies to determine how the existence of religion therein is regarded by relevant key stakeholders. Mixed methods have, therefore, been applied to collect and analyze data from stakeholders at multiple levels within the religious and public sectors, and from other pertinent bodies. The study finds that sentiments regarding the occurrence of religiosity in the public sector workplace have been categorized thus: those that are positive and accommodative, those that are neutral, and the utterly negative. The majority perceived workplace religion positively, albeit advocating caution due to religion's propensity for disruption in the workplace. Those that were utterly unaccommodating were so very few, and so insignificant. This study, therefore, concludes that unlike in other cultural contexts, religiosity is welcome in the African public sector. These findings essentially denote that the management of the public sector need not be uniform globally, but rather contingent on cultural contexts, among other factors. This paper, therefore, recommends that Malawi and countries in similar cultural settings should deliberately integrate religiosity into general public sector administration and particularly, for performance.

**Keywords:** Religiosity, Public sector workplace, Religious sector, Perception

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, interest in workplace religiosity and spirituality has increased (Karakas, 2010; Benefiel, Fry & Geigle, 2014; Sheikhy, Gheisari & Farokhian, 2015; Ranani, 2017; Farmer, Allen, Duncan & Alagaraja, 2019) particularly in the United States of America (Karakas, 2010; Farmer *et al.*, 2019) and generally across the world (Karakas, 2010), among both scholars and corporate managers (Karakas, 2010; Pradhan, Pradhan & Jena, 2016). The growing fascination with these constructs, which in this study are covered under the term religiosity, has manifested in the increased number of studies around the phenomena (Benefiel, Fry & Geigle, 2014; Houghton, Neck & Krishnakumar, 2016; Fox, Camron, Webster & Casper, 2018; Farmer *et al.*, 2019), the related publications flooding the literary market (Karakas, 2010; Pradhan, Pradhan & Jena, 2016), adoption of apparent religion-based business strategies

by corporations such as Boeing, Coca-Cola, Intel, Sears (Karakas, 2010), Ford Motor Company, the World Bank, Apple, and Hewlett-Packard (Mathew, Prashar, Ramanathan, Pandey & Parsad, 2020), Google, and Maruti Suzuki (Devendhiran & Wesley, 2017) and its exploration by influential contemporary management authors such as John Maxwell or Stephen Covey (King, 2007).

The rationale for the attraction is the subject of contention (Benefiel, Fry & Geigle, 2014). Some scholars have attributed it to a paradigm shift in management, resulting in businesses' change of focus to people, planet, and profits (Pradhan, Pradhan & Jena, 2016; Farmer *et al.*, 2019). Other intellectuals have ascribed it to modern enlightened leadership theories (Roof, 2015) and the growing urge to tap into the potential of eastern philosophies (Benefiel, Fry & Geigle, 2014). Alternative perspectives have highlighted employees' demands; the quest for

meaning and purpose in the workplace, and the desire to bring whole selves to work as opposed to parking the religious part of their life at home (Benefiel, Fry & Geigle, 2014; Saseendran, 2014). More pragmatic views have focused on its touted benefits to organisations (Benefiel, Fry & Geigle, 2014), which include performance enhancement (King, 2007; Osman-Gani, Hashim & Ismail, 2013; Fox, Camron, Webester & Casper, 2018; Prashar, Ramanathan & Mathew, 2018).

The integration of religion into the workplace has been limited to private organizations due to the western ideal of church-state separation. The implication is that religiosity has been studied or practised relatively easier in the private sector than in government departments and agencies (King, 2007; Farmer *et al.*, 2019). The downside is that outcomes of such studies, conducted in the private sector, may not be generalised to the public sector. Although some scholars such as Farmer *et al.* (2019), King (2007), and Shah, Larbi & Batley (2007) point out that the boundary between the public and private sector is diminishing, there remain fundamental differences between the two sectors (De Bruijn, 2007), that may justify a separate study. As such, stakeholders of the public sector and religiosity forfeit the benefit of knowledge regarding the propensity of religiosity to influence that sector. Hence calls have arisen for further research of religiosity in the public sector (Farmer *et al.*, 2019).

Fortunately, within Malawi, which in this regard is microcosmic of the African contextual setup, principles of church-state separation are not entertained. This offers an opportunity to explore and leverage religion's influence, and hence its purported potential, to address performance deficiencies and other challenges in this region's government sector. As such the perception of key stakeholders regarding the occurrence of religiosity in the public workplace may be of critical importance as it may influence the acceptance, retention and even exploitation of the concept to the benefit of the sector. However, there appears to be a dearth of studies to determine how the existence of religion therein is regarded by relevant key stakeholders. This study addresses itself to that gap.

## 2. Methodology

Although it is a mixed study, the qualitative approach has been prioritised and emphasized whereby focus

groups and in-depth interviews have been utilised to get data from stakeholders at various levels in the public and religious sectors, respectively. These have been complemented by data extracted from a survey that was derived from a study on the relationship between religiosity and public sector employee performance. Within the public sector, data was collected from the Ministry Education due to its strategic position in the development of Malawi, its monopoly of the national budget, its covering the largest proportion of employees in the Malawi public sector, and the accessibility of its members for data collection sessions. In addition, through snowballing, one representative was identified from a government-independent education-oriented body. From the religious sector, data was collected from the two religions of Christianity and Islam, as the two religions with the highest membership in Malawi; as well as a representative from the group of atheists to provide a counter perspective due to its anti-religion stance. From Christianity, it was from the Roman Catholic, CCAP, and Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) as the biggest overall church, the biggest protestant church, and a unique protestant church, respectively. In addition, two influential leaders of Pentecostal churches were identified through snowballing and interviewed.

Data was collected across the levels in each of the religious and public sectors, to get a holistic comprehension of the relationship between the highlighted variables, and for triangulation purposes. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data is optimal as the qualitative strand takes into account stakeholders' deep-rooted views on the matter since it allows them expression that is not constrained by pre-existing theories or explanations. On the other hand, the quantitative approach would serve validation purposes. Such an approach allows for leveraging the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods and limiting their weaknesses (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014). Thematic analysis and descriptive analysis were used for the qualitative and quantitative data, respectively.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Main themes arising from the qualitative data have been categorized into: (i) positive and accommodative position; (ii) neutral, non-committal or balanced position and; (iii) negative and disapproving position. However, respondents had reckoned that the

influence of religion in the workplace is the same regardless of whether it is a public or private sector context. As such, their responses were not exclusively with regard to the public sector, as highlighted by one of them:

*"(Differentiating) is very difficult because they are the same people that are working in government, that are working in the private sector" (National leader of Christian denomination 2).*

Although the lack of differentiation between the sectors is attributed to the employees, it may be due to the recently introduced New Public Management which, according to Tambulasi (2010) heavily borrows from the private sector. Hence, some have observed that the demarcation between the two sectors is increasingly becoming blurred (King, 2007; Shah *et al.*, 2007) and that, with regards to the occurrence of non-public sector constructs such as religiosity or spirituality, the effect in the two sectors may be the same (King, 2007; Farmer *et al.*, 2019); others such as De Bruijn (2007) have differed, highlighting key differences. Again, based on the findings of the study, there were fundamentally no differences in the perceptions of the respondents from the various sections such as the public versus religious sector, Christians versus Muslims, and among the various Christian denominations. This could be because all the participants were socialized within the same contextual environment that is infused with Abrahamic religiosity values. The exception was the respondent from atheism which is reflective of their irreligious stance.

### 3.1 Positive and Accommodative Sentiments Towards Workplace Religiosity

The majority of the responses reflected a positive view of religiosity in the workplace; whether that it is needed or that it should be tolerated. This may reflect Africa's cultural context, whence the employees emanate and where religion is prevalent and influential. The key themes arising from the data include: the role of religious teachings, the instrumentalist rationale, and mere benevolence to employees.

#### 3.1.1 The Role of Religious Teachings

By teaching about work, religions imply a positive view of religiosity in the workplace. Since such teachings can only be implemented in the workplace, giving and supporting them, reflects acceptance of

religious influence therein. In this regard, a senior leader of a Pentecostal Christian church confirmed and supported the existence of such:

*"... actually in our school of ministry we have a course called principles of work ... religiosity or spirituality should actually enhance work output tremendously" (Senior Pastor, PICC Church, Lilongwe).*

Hence, adherents of such religions have values, attitudes, and behaviours imbued in them through their respective affiliations which they attempt to implement at work either actively or unconsciously, implying acceptance of religious practices in the workplace. Considering that 97.9% of Malawians are religious, religiosity would be viewed positively in the majority of workplaces. Sentiments that such teachings are expected to be implemented in the workplace were echoed by other respondents:

*"... what our religion teaches us it's how we are supposed to live on a daily basis ... and (at) work, at home and everywhere we go ..." (Respondent number 5, BT Catholic Church FGD).*

*"... whenever a Muslim is at a workplace, he should do justice ... say nothing but the truth... and (be) hard-working too..." (Imam for a Lilongwe-based mosque).*

Although from a different denomination and religion, the responses reflect the expectation that religion should exist in the workplace and that it should be impactful. A respondent from the public sector also finds the influence of religion in the workplace palatable:

*"... The Bible says, when you work, work as if you are working for Jesus Christ... how did Jesus Christ work? He pleased the Father, and therefore, I should also please Him..." (Retired Principal Secretary, MoEST).*

The assimilation of biblical teachings such as this one from Colossians 3 verse 23 (*Holy Bible: New International Version*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, 2011) at the senior level of Principal Secretary may act as a signal to lower level employees to view religiosity positively in the public sector workplace. According to Ghazzawi, Smith & Cao (2016) and Farmer *et al.* (2019), leaders play a key role in ensuring a conducive environment for religiosity in the workplace. Hence religious practices are expected to thrive in such contexts.

Furthermore, that religiosity may enter the public workplace through teachings acquired by employees at their religions is supported by Shah *et al.* (2007) and King (2007) and confirmed by Lowery (2005) through an empirical study. Such imply default positivity towards the concept. Relatedly, theorists have argued that the purported exclusion of religiosity from public administration in the west is arrogant (Lynch, Omdal & Cruise, 1996).

### 3.1.2 The Instrumentalist Rationale

The fundamental premises of positivity towards workplace religiosity has been its potential benefit to organizations. Relatedly, the dominant themes from the data have related to religion's impact on behavior, and the benefits from divine intervention.

#### 3.1.2.1 The Impact of Religion on Behaviour

This theme captures respondents' positive sentiments towards workplace religiosity owing to its positive effect on behaviour. Godly fear has been credited for inducing behavioral transformation. Three participants from both the religions and the public sector substantiated that position:

*"...if you are a faithful Muslim, who really fears God, ... (he) sees ... wherever you are ... everything that you do, you may cheat that director ... but God will know that you are lying. ... on judgment day all of us will be asked on everything ... so you will be punished." (Respondent number 4, Lilongwe Islam, FGD).*

*"... because they will have the sense of the fear of God in them. That is when they say ... I cannot do such a thing because that will be committing wickedness against my God. So, that way your company resources will be protected but also ... see that sense of dedication to God will motivate people to work harder in their workplaces because their God already encouraged them ... encourages them to be hard workers." (Senior Pastor, Pentecostal Church, Lilongwe).*

*"...your beliefs will determine how you perform if you know that there is a power above you ... So, you fear because there is somebody who sees everything ... rather than the boss who is here today and then you hear that he has gone to the UK for two to three weeks, then you say ah let's relax but with God, he is everywhere and sees everything. So, when you have that in mind, your performance would be determined by that power..." (Retired Principal Secretary, MoEST).*

These responses share a particular characterisation of God which is attributable to the Abrahamic religions and aids behavioral change; he prescribes moral and behavioural standards to be met, is omnipresent and omniscient as to monitor peoples' behaviour violation and is omnipotent as to punish deviance. Such view of God produces fear and reverence in the adherents of Christianity and Islam which in turn, suffices to either induce certain acceptable behaviours or control divergent ones. Since the resultant behaviours are credited with positive workplace environment and results, religiosity is viewed positively. That the respondent from the public sector shares similar sentiments is indicative of religiosity's practicality and acceptance in the sector.

Literature on Abrahamic spirituality backs the existence of a God who combats evil, has provided written moral prescriptions in the form of bible and Koran and monitors humans to ensure compliance (Ghazzawi, Smith & Cao, 2016). As such adherents within those faiths behave so as to revere him (Mathew *et al.*, 2020) even in the workplace. Research also shows that over half of the people who regularly participate in religious sessions, believe that their work honours God (Neubert & Dougherty, 2015). However, other literature has emphasised a relationship with God (Brotheridge & Lee, no date; Bauer & Johnson, 2019), as opposed to fear as a motivation for behavioural change. Nevertheless, the resultant behavioral transformation, whether from fear or relationship, still shows religiosity in a positive light. Furthermore, another challenge with this basis for behavioral change with respect to religionists is the absence of a God figure in some religions (Nye, 2008; Van Niekerk, 2018). However, this is not applicable to the Abrahamic religions in question in this study. Additionally, a number of Christian scriptures exhort the fear of God, with one of them highlighting such reverence as the beginning of wisdom (*Holy Bible: New International Version*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, 2011). In Islam Taqwa, the fear of God, is considered the essence of all the teachings of the prophet Muhammad and the only force that, not only teaches right and wrong but also, compels man from evil (Zubair, 2017). This compulsion from evil is premised on the already espoused character of God as an omniscient, as highlighted in Surah 49:13 (Saheeh International, 2012).

Prayer has also been credited with behavioural change by respondents. In this regard, respondents



from the religious and the public sector highlighted the role of prayer, as a deterrent of bad behavior:

*"...in the Quran, there is a teaching which says praying makes one to part with bad things..., meaning that if you have just prayed, ... you challenge yourself to say, I have just prayed so for me to steal here...things like those ... So, as long as you are doing the work you will be doing it faithfully." (Respondent number 1, Lilongwe Islam, FGD).*

*"... I have also seen it working where you start with prayers, close with prayers. ...there is a message that is sent in the organization that we are being led by a God fearing person and it does promote or influence some integrity elements in it..." (Respondent number 5, Lilongwe CCAP, FGD.)*

*"... I remember a situation whether one class was causing problems... we tried all sorts of measures but to no avail, until we said, let's seek the help of a pastor to talk to them but also pray for them..." (Headmistress, Lilongwe Primary School)*

The above responders expressed the belief that prayer, an aspect of religion, has the capacity to improve behavior. They have attributed behavioral to prayer without adequately articulating the purported cause-effect relationship. That notwithstanding, there seems to be firm belief that prayer can achieve such feat and on that premise, there is positive perception towards such aspect of religion. Literature does not seem to substantiate that prayer is deterrent for misbehavior. However, based on empirical data, prayer has been touted as tool for reducing the chance for erroneous decision making among workplace executives through refining their intuition (Schreurs, Van Emmerik, De Cuyper & Probst, 2014). This claim on prayer would still make it attractive, acceptable and positive in the workplace. The absence of literature on prayer as a tool for deterring bad behavior may be due to the actual absence of evidence to back that claim. Nevertheless, for purposes of this study it is adequate that they perceive prayer, an element of religiosity, positively.

### 3.1.2.2 Divine Intervention

Belief in divine intervention has been one of the bases for positive perception of workplace religiosity:

*"... it's a good thing according to Islam the workplace must ... accommodate its members to perform*

*their religious activities... to pray, then (by doing that) they are seeking the bounties of the blessings of God to be descended on their work places" (Imam Lilongwe, Mosque).*

*"... I feel that everyday God is doing something in my life; the work is going smooth because of God's intervention." (Primary Education Authority (PEA) 1, Lilongwe).*

Such conviction regarding divine intervention is ordinarily attributed to Christians of Pentecostal-Charismatic traditions. They believe that through prayer and supplication, whenever they are unable to remedy their situation, God intervenes in the framework of natural laws and a miracle ensues (Yong, 2008). Within Malawi though, Christian practices are so integrated that those that would ordinarily be attributed exclusively to one denomination is applicable to more others. In this regard empirical studies found that the concept of being Born Again, otherwise restricted to Pentecostalism, had permeated Malawian Catholicism (Manglos, 2010). Nevertheless, the critical question relating to our study is not the actuality of miracles, but rather whether participants believe they happen, and consequently how such belief compels them to view religiosity positively.

### 3.1.3 The Benevolence Rationale

This covers two themes that denote positive perception of the occurrence of religiosity in the workplace on humane as opposed to instrumentalist basis, namely: (i) religion and work being inseparable and; (ii) religion as part of the lives of employees. The essence of the argument is that religiosity should be allowed to benefit employees although it may not translate into meeting of organizational goals.

#### 3.1.3.1 Religion and Work are Inseparable

The argument is that if work and religion cannot be separated, people are likely to be accustomed to having religiosity in the workplace and to view it positively. In this regard, participants pursued the line of argument that work is a subset of religion. In relation to this, the respondents below have posited that work is actually an act of prayer or worship:

*"... Just to add, in Islam when we talk of worshipping God, whereby you could also be rewarded, working ... is also part of worshipping" (Respondent number 4, Lilongwe Islam, FDG).*

*"... and there is also a saying in Latin ... laborare est orare... to work is to pray ... we have a place ... while we are working ... it's part of prayer also if we are doing it well ..."* (National leader, Catholic Church).

*"... worship is about work. The worship is the work ..., wherever we are blessed to work, we should demonstrate that aspect that we are a worshipping community. That at the end of the day as a Christian, at the work place you assess yourself ... is God being worshipped ... in what I am doing?"* (National leader, CCAP Church).

The line of argument entails that religion will be found in the workplace by default, because it encompasses work. Hence, religiosity is accommodated, whether in the public or private sector, just as the work itself is acceptable. In Christian literature this view is based on a direct quote from the letter of Paul to the Colossians Chapter 3 verse 23 (*Holy Bible: New International Version*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, 2011). Christians have considered this scripture as applying directly at the workplace where working for any organization should be considered to be working for God. If all work is considered to be for pleasing God, then religion cannot be divorced from work and is likely to be accommodated in the workplace.

This view was also echoed in the public sector:

*"... it is important that in a workplace there must be an element of religion. That's my belief because for everything to work better that element of religion must be there, because it's not you but what is inside you that will force you to work better..."* (PEA 1, Lilongwe).

This assertion sounds less authoritative and more like an opinion. This could be so because she was not expressing it as government policy but rather, drawing from her religious background, thus backing the stance that religion may find itself in the workplace through the affiliation of employees who would view workplace religiosity positively as a result. The view that religion and work are inextricable is entrenched mostly in religious academia. Christian literature highlights that work existed at the very beginning with God himself carrying it out. Furthermore, it is claimed that God decided that man should work as part of his fellowship with him (Neubert & Dougherty, 2015). As such, work and religion cannot be separated; doing work would not only replicate what God does, but also would

be based on his example and prescription. Hence, work is godly business i.e. religion. In relation to the thinking that work and religion are inseparable, Max Weber argued that the Christian faith of protestant orientation influenced how its adherents worked. In his renowned book, 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism', he posits that motivation of Protestants to work hard and support capitalism, was based on the teachings of Calvin, particularly his doctrine of asceticism and predestination. However, since this seminal work, other theorists have argued for Catholic work ethics, and Islamic work ethics (Ghazzawi, Smith & Cao, 2016).

Hence, based on Weber's claims it can be argued that the way Protestants work draws from their religious orientations. Likewise, it can be concluded with Catholics, and Muslims and their respective work ethics. Thus, the concepts of religion and work would be considered resolutely integrated. It is thus of little surprise that within the context of Malawi, where Christians in terms of Catholics and Protestants, plus Muslims constitute almost the whole category of the religious populace, respondents welcome religion in the workplace on account of it being inextricably linked to work.

### 3.1.3.2 Religion as Part of the Lives of Employees

The essence of this position is that people are receptive of religion in the workplace because it is part of employees' lives. The argument is that workers cannot leave a part of themselves at the gate and enter the workplace as secular beings. In this regard, some responded thus:

*"... as a Christian we know we always live because God lives, we always do whatever because God lives. So, the moment someone tells a Christian not to pray, that is a big blow."* (Pastor, SDA Church Lilongwe).

This is part of the classical explanation in literature of how religion finds itself in the workplace. Karakas (2010) theorizes that employees have wanted to be recognized for who they are, as whole individuals even in the workplace, leaving aside nothing of aspects of their personality including religion. Therefore, they have demanded to be allowed to bring their whole selves to work and not to be allowed to park any part of their person at the gate to the organization (Benefiel, Fry & Geigle, 2014; Saseendran, 2014). In return wherever employers have addressed this need to treat workers as full humans, embracing even their

religions it has positively affected their satisfaction (Ghazzawi, Smith & Cao, 2016).

### 3.2 Neutral, Non-Committal or Balanced

This section presents neutral themes, which include those that advocate tolerance of religion under particular conditions and those who consider religion to be neither helpful nor harmful.

#### 3.2.1 Religion Acceptable Under Particular Conditions

Under this theme some participants approved the occurrence of religiosity in the workplace subject to certain limitations, while others opined that religion could have been acceptable if it met certain conditions, implying that it cannot.

*"... (the practice of religiosity in the workplace) is good ... it's good as long as you respect the rights of the other persons ... preaching at the work place it's not a problem ... but you just have to be sensitive to the needs and beliefs of other people ..."* (Respondent number 6, BT Catholic Church, FGD).

The primary position for this participant is a positive view towards religiosity. However, he implies that the goodwill towards religiosity is not open ended and hints that his perception of religion could be negative, if otherwise. A similar theme is where only a particular type of religious practice is deemed acceptable in the workplace. Responses from the religious and public sectors contributed to this view as highlighted below:

*... everyone has individual needs that is what we Muslims believe in ... so, when we say let us pray as a group, you find that it is one person praying for all and all of them are responding, Amen! ... which means someone will be found to not have fulfilled his prayer. (Lilongwe, Islam FGD, respondent number 2).*

*"...you would just put up prayer rooms. Say yes if somebody wants to pray to their God there are prayer rooms on ground floor ... something like that so, somebody will be going to pray to Allah somebody will go to release their stress, you know. Come back and work better but not collectively let us pray." (Lilongwe, SDA, respondent number 5).*

The above views find the practice of religiosity in the workplace acceptable only if practiced at individual

level on account that collective religiosity would be oppressive and discriminatory towards minorities. That viewpoint may be inspired by actual experience since the respondents are members of a minority religion and a minority Christian denomination, respectively. The sentiments that religiosity without qualification has potential for dysfunctions in the workplace are supported in literature. With respect to discrimination, Benefiel, Fry and Geigle (2014) observe that litigation has been rife due to such in the modern workplace. Most theorists recommend individual religiosity, termed spirituality, at the expense of generic collective religion, not on the basis of religiosity's discriminatory tendencies alone but also general efficacy (Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, Rye, Butter, Belavich, Hipp, Scott & Kadar, 1997). This view was supported by a senior position holder in the public sector:

*"... but if you are defining religiosity where spirituality is in there then the effect is different ... that religion on its own without spirituality, it would not affect quite much" (Director, MOEST).*

The primary position of this participant was that religiosity could have been acceptable if it was in the form of spirituality. However, he believes spirituality is unachievable in Malawi, hence religiosity should not be tolerated in the workplace.

#### 3.2.2 Religion Not Making a Difference

Another theme is of indifference towards workplace religiosity on the rationale that it has no effect whether good or bad as highlighted by a respondent from the public sector:

*"... It doesn't really manifest and it doesn't really have an impact in terms of activities of education because normally what we have is just a record of who belongs to which religion but it doesn't even have any impact anywhere" (PEA 2, Lilongwe).*

This theme appears to not have been supported by other responses from officers above below or even on equal ranking with the respondent. There is a possibility the response might have been given based on frustrations with the interview which he revealed later was inconvenient to him. Nevertheless, it reveals a neutral perception of workplace religiosity.

#### 3.2.3 Religiosity as Both Helpful and Harmful

Another neutral stance characterises religiosity as bearing potential to help as well as to harm such

that one's perception might be contingent on the nature of a particular religious practice as highlighted by this respondent:

*"... aa yes (the practice of religiosity in the workplace) has both (positive and negative) effects" (Member of Association of Secular Humanism (ASH)).*

Although such a response reflects a balanced position, the respondent ultimately was negative about the presence of religiosity in the workplace not only on the basis of its oppression of other beliefs but also on the argument that religiosity's beliefs which spur the good effects are based on fallacious premises hence untenable. Religiosity's tendency for both positive and negative effects is highlighted by authors (Karakas, 2010; Osman-Gani, Hashim & Ismail, 2013).

### 3.3 Negative and Disapproving Position

Other sentiments were disapproving of the occurrence of religiosity in the workplace. Typically, they observed that although religiosity has potential for positive impact in the workplace, ultimately it should not exist there. Such respondents included these two from the public sector and an education-oriented body, respectively:

*"... so it also becomes a problem. In fact, we would have loved if the school was devoid of such (religious) practices." (Director, MOEST).*

*"... why do you want to go to work? To do the work! (animated tone, almost getting angry about it) why do you want to pray there why you don't go somewhere where you are going to pray? ... these should be separated...you should not waste employer's time..." (Chairperson, Education oriented body)*

Both of them had highlighted that religiosity had positive effects in the public sector, however, ultimately their position was that it should not be allowed there. They both held senior positions within their workplaces. Hence, their view could be due to the exposure to western studies and experiences which oriented them to the church-state separation.

At epistemological level, the discourse on the pertinence of the occurrence of religion in the public sector may be, rooted in the science/facts versus values debate regarding public administration,

whose chief protagonists were at one point, the prominent scholars, Herbert Simon and Dwight Waldo (Harmon, 2013). The viewpoint of western thought on this matter is reflected in the principle of church-state separation; it is rebuked by some theorists (Lowery, 2005; King, 2007; Shah *et al.*, 2007) and rejected in the African cultural context (Manglos, 2011).

## 4. The Results of a Survey on the Perception of Religiosity in the Workplace

For purpose of validating the outcome of this study, data on survey questions relating to the perception on religiosity was extracted from two questionnaires, targeting the public and the religious sector, respectively and analyzed. This data was collected from lay members of religions and primary school teachers representing the religious sector and the public sector, respectively. For these questions, positive responses represent positive perception towards religiosity. In the public sector, therefore, the numbers of responses falling in each of the categories of the Likert scale were aggregated for each statement and a percentage calculated to determine whether the general perception towards religiosity is positive, neutral or negative. Table 1 and 2 on the next page present a summary of the findings.

The findings from both the religious sector and the public sector reveal that there is positive perception of the occurrence of religiosity in the public sector workplace. While the religious sector was asked about the perception of religiosity in any workplace, the public sector was asked about it in a public primary school which is in the public sector. The findings in both sectors reveal the positive perception that religiosity in the public sector has with the positive responses at 69% and 79% in the religious and public sector, respectively. This supports the findings of the qualitative approach which also reflects positivity. While the qualitative results suggest a variation in the themes regarding the perception of religiosity, the survey reveals that the majority are welcoming of religiosity in the public sector workplace. Furthermore, for each question, over 50% of the responses imply positive perception except for question no. 3 in the questionnaire for the religious sector with 49%. Even in that one, the positive perception is still in the majority; with the negative perception at 32% and 34% coming up as neutral.



**Table 1: Summary of the Perception of Lay Members of Christianity and Islam Towards Occurrence of Religiosity in the Public Sector Workplace**

No	Question	Positive Perception		Neutral	Negative Perception		Total
		S. Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	S. Disagree	
1	I expect my religion to positively affect the integrity of its members in the workplace	45	105	13	14	3	180
2	Religions/denominations should provide guidance to their members regarding work and life at the workplace	64	100	7	11	1	183
3	Religion helps its members to work hard at the workplace	36	80	31	32	3	182
4	Religiosity or being religious positively affects satisfaction with one's job	23	67	34	54	5	183
5	Religiosity or being religious positively affects an employee's commitment to work	17	90	30	42	4	183
6	Religiosity or being religious helps one to be a good leader at work	61	79	16	23	4	183
7	One's religiosity or religiousness can positively influence his/her performance at work	31	80	26	32	13	182
Total		277	601	157	208	33	1276
Percentage		22%	47%	12%	16%	3%	100%

Source: Author

**Table 2: Summary of the Perception of Government Primary Teachers Towards the Occurrence of Religiosity in the Public Sector Workplace**

No	Question	Positive Perception		Neutral	Negative Perception		Total
		S. Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	S. Disagree	
1	The practice of religious activities among primary school teachers is good	33	52	12	7	1	105
2	The practice of religious activities among primary school teachers is good for the individual teachers practicing them	23	52	14	13	3	105
3	The practice of religious activities among primary school teachers is good for other teachers	20	64	16	6	3	109
4	The practice of religion at school by primary school teacher is good for the pupils	21	65	8	5	5	104
5	Religiosity affects the attitude of teachers positively	17	49	19	14	5	104
6	Religiosity should be encouraged among primary school teachers	26	54	8	13	7	108
7	Religiosity positively affects the performance of public sector employees	17	44	27	15	4	107
Total		157	380	104	73	28	742
Percentage		21%	51%	14%	10%	4%	100%

Source: Author

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, qualitative data was supplemented by quantitative data to determine the perception towards religiosity in the workplace. The findings point to an ultimate position of positivity for both public and religious sectors. Although many respondents highlighted religiosity's potential for dysfunction, their primary position was of positivity while the negative aspects were highlighted in the temperament of a disclaimer. This has been validated by the survey results with the majority reflecting positivity in their responses. Although the survey was administered on the lower echelons of each sector, the results have validated the qualitative findings, which targeted highly ranked officials.

Furthermore, much as the study targeted perception in the public sector, for the qualitative strand, the participants from the religious sector responded about workplaces in general. This could be because most of the senior religious members have had no opportunity to experience the workplace and could not differentiate. Nevertheless, the fact that responses from the sectors were aligned may reflect uniformity of perception. These findings essentially denote that the management of the public sector need not be uniform globally, but rather contingent on cultural contexts, among other factors. This paper therefore, recommends that Malawi and countries in similar cultural settings should leverage this opportunity by deliberately integrating religiosity into general public sector administration and particularly, for performance improvement.

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