

Mechanisms Through Which Secular Ideologies Challenge Friends Church Marriage Principles in Trans Nzoia County, Kenya

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Abstract- Secularism has reshaped the relationship between religious institutions and the social practices they once governed, marriage among them. This study examined the specific mechanisms through which secular ideologies currently challenge Friends Church (Quaker) marriage principles in Trans Nzoia County, Kenya. Anchored in the theory of disenchantment and a complementary Quaker theology of covenant and communal discernment, the study employed a descriptive survey design. Structured questionnaires were administered to 224 respondents comprising married persons, divorcees, village leaders, and church elders, and the data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Five reinforcing mechanisms emerged: media and social-network influence on relationship expectations (26.8%), Western education promoting individual autonomy in marriage decisions (21.4%), economic pressures prioritising material success over family stability (18.8%), political and legal changes enabling easier marriage dissolution (17.9%), and declining church participation that weakens marriage-support systems (15.2%). Contemporary practice has shifted toward greater tolerance of diverse marriage arrangements and reduced biblical preparation, while 62.5% of respondents reported significant or moderate secular impact on marriage stability. Church leadership engagement was largely inconsistent, with only 17.9% reporting frequent attention to marriage challenges. The study concludes that secular influences operate as an integrated system rather than as isolated pressures, and that current institutional responses, dominated by accommodation, are inadequate. It recommends systematic marriage ministry, leadership training, and revitalised community accountability.

Keywords: *Secularism, Marriage Stability, Friends Church, Disenchantment*

I. INTRODUCTION

Secularism is among the most consequential forces shaping contemporary religious life, advancing a paradigm shift in the general approach to life and in

the conduct of human relationships (Copson, 2017). Far from receding, secularisation remains a robust feature of modern societies, operating through the differentiation of social spheres, the decline of religious authority over everyday life, and the privatisation of belief (Stolz, 2020; Voas et al., 2023; Cragun et al., 2023). These processes do not affect all institutions evenly; they bear with particular force on marriage, which has long stood at the intersection of religious authority and social regulation (Schnabel, 2021).

Within the Religious Society of Friends, marriage is understood not as a private contract between two individuals but as a covenant entered before God and witnessed by the believing community, formed through communal discernment and sustained through mutual accountability (Daniels et al., 2018; Barbour, 2019).

In East Africa, where Quaker Christianity has grown into one of the largest concentrations of Friends worldwide, these covenantal understandings have been woven into local cultural and ecclesial life (Hammond, 2022; Wekesa, 2021). The Friends Church in Trans Nzoia County, in western Kenya, exemplifies this tradition, having historically formed marriages through Monthly Meeting clearance and ongoing spiritual oversight.

A growing body of Kenyan scholarship indicates that secular influences are reshaping Christian marriage across the country, from urban centres to rural denominational communities (Okello, 2023; Opiyo, 2022; Omollo & Ichuloi, 2022). Yet much of this work treats secular influence as a single, undifferentiated pressure, leaving unexamined the distinct pathways through which it operates within

particular faith communities. This paper, drawn from a larger doctoral study, addresses that gap by examining the mechanisms through which secular ideologies currently challenge Friends Church marriage principles in Trans Nzoia County, assessing their measured impact on marriage stability, and evaluating the adequacy of church leadership responses.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Friends Church in Trans Nzoia County traditionally upholds marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant characterised by mutual fidelity, spiritual accountability, and community oversight through Monthly Meeting processes (Daniels et al., 2018).

In practice, however, a significant gap has opened between these ideals and the conduct of contemporary members. Preliminary evidence from the county indicates that approximately 60% of younger Friends bypass traditional Meeting clearance in favour of civil ceremonies, that Monthly Meeting records show a 40% increase in marriage-related disciplinary cases between 2020 and 2024, and that participation in Meeting-sponsored marriage enrichment has declined by about 50% over the past decade. Cohabitation before marriage is estimated at 45% among young adult Friends, divorce among members has risen from roughly 15% a decade ago to about 25%, and reliance on Meeting elders for marital guidance has fallen by some 60% since 2015.

The consequences of this widening gap are serious and cumulative. The measurable decline in marriage stability, expressed through rising divorce, reduced community oversight, and weakened adherence to Friends testimonies in marital conduct, threatens not only individual family stability but also the spiritual integrity and social cohesion of the wider community (Krispin, 2020; Frederick et al., 2021).

Because marriage is the principal vehicle through which Friends testimonies are transmitted across generations, its erosion places the continuity of the tradition itself at risk (Root, 2022). Without a clear understanding of the specific mechanisms through which secularism influences marriage stability in this context, the Friends Church lacks the empirical

foundation necessary to design effective interventions. There is therefore an urgent need to investigate how secular ideologies impact traditional Quaker marriage practices and to identify the primary pathways through which that influence operates.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by a dual framework that combines a sociological and a theological lens. The sociological component draws on the theory of disenchantment, which holds that as societies embrace rationality and bureaucratic organisation, the sacred frameworks that once governed social institutions are progressively withdrawn and replaced by rational, individualistic ones (Dhima & Golder, 2021).

Within this account, religious authority over institutions such as marriage declines, and decisions once governed by spiritual discernment are reframed as matters of personal choice and legal procedure. The framework is well suited to explaining the transformation of marriage from a community-regulated covenant into a private arrangement based on individual preference and civil recognition.

Applied to the Friends Church, the disenchantment lens illuminates how traditional Quaker marriage practices, rooted in divine guidance through the Inner Light and in communal discernment, become marginalised as individualistic and contractual approaches gain prominence.

It accounts for the movement away from marriage as a covenant requiring Meeting clearance and community oversight toward marriage as a personal contract sustained by individual satisfaction, and it links the specific mechanisms examined in this study to broader processes of religious and social rationalisation.

The theological component draws on Quaker theology of marriage and community, in particular the doctrine of the Inner Light, the practice of communal discernment, the testimonies of simplicity, integrity, and equality, and a covenantal understanding of matrimony witnessed by God and the gathered community (Block, 2021; Daniels et al.,

2018). Integrating the two lenses allows the analysis to treat secularisation as an external pressure toward rationalisation and individualism while specifying the particular theological commitments being challenged, and to show how general secularising trends operate differently within a specific religious worldview.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Secularisation theory provides the conceptual foundation for this study. Contemporary scholarship affirms that secularisation persists in modern societies, even where religious belief endures, through the steady withdrawal of religious authority from public institutions (Stolz, 2020; Voas et al., 2023; Cragun et al., 2023).

A central strand of this tradition is the theory of disenchantment, which holds that as societies embrace rationality and bureaucratic organisation, the sacred frameworks that once governed institutions such as marriage are progressively displaced by rational and individualistic ones (Dhima & Golder, 2021). This perspective is particularly apt for analysing the transformation of marriage from a community-regulated covenant into a private arrangement based on personal choice and legal recognition.

Applied to marriage, secularisation theory connects closely to accounts of the deinstitutionalisation of marriage, in which shared norms governing union formation and dissolution progressively weaken (Cherlin, 2020).

Empirical studies of changing union-formation patterns document the practical expression of this shift, including the rising acceptance of cohabitation as a substitute for, or precursor to, formal marriage (Lesthaeghe, 2020; Lichter et al., 2020). Secularisation has also been linked to declining fertility and to the reframing of family life around individual fulfilment rather than communal obligation (Schnabel, 2021).

Within Christian contexts, scholars observe that secular relationship models compete directly with covenantal understandings of marriage and that churches increasingly struggle to retain authority

over relationship decisions (Krispin, 2020; Mohler, 2020; Root, 2022; De Villiers, 2020). Legal developments compound this challenge, as the recognition of civil marriage as equivalent to religious marriage creates parallel frameworks that bypass religious preparation and accountability (Cox & Thompson, 2022; Copson, 2017).

In African settings specifically, research has examined the negotiation between mission Christianity, customary practice, and contemporary secular pressures on marriage (Ngundu, 2023; Adjei, 2023). Kenyan studies provide the most directly relevant evidence, documenting secular influences on Christian marriage in Kisumu (Okello, 2023), urban secularisation and marriage trends in Nairobi (Opiyo, 2022), and divorce dynamics within an established denomination in Siaya County (Omollo & Ichuloi, 2022).

The Quaker tradition has received particular attention regarding secular challenge. Studies note both its distinctive vulnerabilities, rooted in its emphasis on individual conscience and the Inner Light, and its capacities for resilience through communal discernment (Barbour, 2019; Martinelli, 2020; Small, 2023).

In the Kenyan Friends context, research on widowhood and marriage rites has shown how traditional, Christian, and secular frameworks intersect within the same communities (Wekesa, 2021; Hammond, 2022). Collectively, this literature establishes that secularisation affects marriage through multiple channels, yet it stops short of isolating the specific mechanisms operating within a single Quaker community, which is the contribution this paper seeks to make.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey design, appropriate for documenting the prevalence and relative weight of the mechanisms through which secular ideologies challenge marriage principles (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The research was conducted among Friends Church communities in Trans Nzoia County, a region with a long history of Quaker mission presence in western Kenya.

The findings reported here are based on quantitative data collected through structured questionnaires administered to 224 respondents drawn from four categories of community members: married persons, divorcees, village leaders, and church elders.

This composition was designed to capture both the lived experience of marriage and the perspectives of those who exercise community and ecclesial authority. Questionnaire items addressed perceptions of secular challenges, the mechanisms through which those challenges operate, observed changes in marriage practice, the perceived impact on stability, and the frequency and adequacy of leadership responses.

The instruments were pretested through a pilot study to establish content validity and reliability. Content validity was verified by subject experts in the Department of Social Sciences, and reliability was assessed using internal-consistency methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, with responses summarised as frequencies and percentages and presented in tabular form. Ethical clearance and a research permit were obtained; informed consent was secured from all participants; and confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were maintained throughout the study.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

6.1 Perceptions of Secular Challenges to Marriage

Respondents were first asked to identify the primary secular challenge to marriage stability within their communities. Their responses are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondent Perceptions of Primary Secular Challenges to Marriage Stability

Secular challenge to marriage	n	%
Decline in Christian marriage values	55	24.6
Separation of marriage from religious authority	50	22.3
Weakening of commitment to biblical	45	20.1

Secular challenge to marriage	n	%
principles		
Increase in liberal thinking about relationships	40	17.9
Loss of traditional church authority over marriage	34	15.2
Total	224	100.0

Note. Field data, 2025.

As Table 1 shows, the largest proportion of respondents (24.6%) identified a decline in Christian marriage values as the primary secular challenge, followed by the separation of marriage from religious authority (22.3%) and the weakening of commitment to biblical principles (20.1%). The rise of liberal thinking about relationships accounted for 17.9% of responses, and the loss of traditional church authority over marriage for 15.2%.

The relatively even spread across the five categories implies that secular challenge is not perceived as a single problem but as a diffuse erosion that simultaneously affects values, religious authority, belief, and church oversight. This suggests that no single corrective measure will suffice; the community is aware of the threat, yet that threat operates across several fronts at once, requiring an equally broad institutional response.

These perceptions are consistent with the literature on the deinstitutionalisation of marriage, in which shared norms governing marriage progressively weaken (Cherlin, 2020), and with accounts of parallel civil and religious marriage systems that detach marriage from religious authority (Cox & Thompson, 2022). The pattern also reflects the disenchantment of religiously governed institutions, whereby covenantal frameworks give way to individualistic and contractual ones (Dhima & Golder, 2021).

6.2 Mechanisms of Secular Challenge

Respondents then identified the primary mechanisms through which secular ideologies operate to challenge marriage stability, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Primary Mechanisms Through Which Secular Ideologies Challenge Marriage Stability

Mechanism of challenge	n	%
Media and social-network influence	60	26.8
Western education promoting individual autonomy	48	21.4
Economic pressures prioritising material success	42	18.8
Political and legal changes enabling easier dissolution	40	17.9
Declining church participation reducing support	34	15.2
Total	224	100.0

Note. Field data, 2025.

Media and social-network influence was identified by the largest group (26.8%), followed by Western education promoting individual autonomy in marriage decisions (21.4%), economic pressures prioritising material success over family stability (18.8%), political and legal changes enabling easier dissolution (17.9%), and declining church participation that reduces marriage-support systems (15.2%). Media influence therefore stands out as the single most prominent mechanism, while the remaining four are closely grouped.

The prominence of media and social networks implies that the leading edge of secular influence is now digital, reaching members continuously and privately and bearing especially on younger couples. The close grouping of the other mechanisms implies that education, economics, law, and declining participation operate as complementary channels rather than competing explanations, so that addressing any one in isolation is unlikely to stem the overall effect.

The salience of media-borne individualism accords with arguments that media is a principal vector of secular influence on family life (Schnabel, 2021; Krispin, 2020), while the role of education aligns with accounts of formal schooling as a driver of secularisation (Stolz, 2020; Voas et al., 2023).

The economic mechanism reflects documented tensions between professional advancement and family commitment (Frederick et al., 2021), the legal mechanism echoes analyses of civil marriage and simplified divorce (Cox & Thompson, 2022; Copson, 2017), and declining participation corresponds to ecclesial accounts of decline in a secular age (Root, 2022; De Villiers, 2020).

6.3 Changes in Contemporary Marriage Practices

Respondents were asked to identify how marriage practice has changed relative to traditional Friends principles. The observed changes are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Contemporary Changes in Friends Church Marriage Practices

Change in marriage practice	n	%
Increased tolerance for diverse arrangements	58	25.9
Reduced emphasis on biblical preparation	50	22.3
Greater accommodation of individual preferences	45	20.1
Modified ceremonies incorporating secular elements	42	18.8
Less focus on traditional roles	29	12.9
Total	224	100.0

Note. Field data, 2025.

Increased tolerance for diverse marriage arrangements was the most frequently noted change (25.9%), followed by reduced emphasis on biblical preparation (22.3%), greater accommodation of individual preferences (20.1%), modified ceremonies incorporating secular elements (18.8%), and less focus on traditional roles and responsibilities (12.9%).

These figures imply that secular influence has translated from attitudes into concrete institutional practice. The leading changes, tolerance of diverse arrangements and reduced preparation, imply a move away from communal discernment toward individual choice, suggesting that the church has tended to

accommodate secular expectations rather than resist them, with potential long-term cost to the spiritual foundations of marriage.

This accommodation pattern mirrors the institutional adaptation described in studies of churches negotiating secular pressure (Mohler, 2020) and in African analyses of the tension between mission Christianity, custom, and contemporary change (Ngundu, 2023; Adjei, 2023). The reduction in preparation and discernment is significant because these processes have been identified in the literature as central to marriage stability within the Quaker tradition (Daniels et al., 2018; Martinelli, 2020).

6.4 Impact on Marriage Stability

Respondents assessed the overall impact of secular ideologies on marriage stability within their communities, with results presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Respondent Assessment of Secular Impact on Marriage Stability

Level of impact on marriage stability	n	%
Significant impact	78	34.8
Moderate impact	62	27.7
Slight impact	50	22.3
No impact	34	15.2
Total	224	100.0

Note. Field data, 2025.

A combined 62.5% of respondents reported a substantial effect, comprising 34.8% who perceived significant impact and 27.7% who perceived moderate impact. A further 22.3% reported only slight impact, while just 15.2% perceived no impact on marriage stability.

The predominance of significant and moderate ratings implies that secular influence has moved beyond peripheral pressure to reshape how marriages are formed, conducted, and maintained, and that it has been internalised even among committed members. The presence of a sizeable slight-impact group implies uneven exposure across the community, pointing to hybrid marriage models in which religious and secular elements coexist.

This widespread recognition is consistent with evidence that secular relationship models compete directly with covenantal understandings within Christian communities (Krispin, 2020) and with Kenyan findings on uneven, often generational, urban secularisation (Opiyo, 2022). The concrete manifestations reported, rising cohabitation and divorce and weakened community support, align with the deinstitutionalisation of marriage and changing union-formation patterns documented more broadly (Cherlin, 2020; Lichter et al., 2020).

6.5 Church Leadership Responses

The adequacy of institutional response was first assessed by the frequency with which church leaders address marriage challenges, as presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Frequency of Church Leadership Addressing Marriage Stability Challenges

Frequency of addressing challenges	n	%
Very frequently	40	17.9
Occasionally	70	31.3
Rarely	64	28.6
Never	50	22.3
Total	224	100.0

Note. Field data, 2025.

Only 17.9% of respondents reported that leaders address marriage challenges very frequently. The largest group (31.3%) reported occasional engagement, while 28.6% reported rare engagement and 22.3% reported that such challenges are never addressed, giving a combined 50.9% who reported rare or no engagement.

These figures imply substantial institutional neglect, with most communities responding only to acute crises rather than providing systematic teaching and preventive support. The implication is that secular influences identified in earlier tables are left to operate largely unchallenged, widening the gap between the scale of the problem and the response to it.

This inadequacy parallels accounts of churches under-equipped, in training and resources, for the

scale of secular challenge in a secular age (Root, 2022) and resonates with Kenyan denominational studies that tie divorce dynamics to institutional response capacity (Omollo & Ichuloi, 2022).

The obstacles underlying this limited engagement were then examined, as presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Primary Challenges in Church Marriage Ministry

Challenge in marriage ministry	n	%
Lack of member commitment to biblical principles	62	27.7
Pressure to accommodate modern expectations	58	25.9
Limited financial resources for programmes	42	18.8
Weak authority in enforcing guidelines	38	17.0
Declining participation in marriage activities	24	10.7
Total	224	100.0

Note. Field data, 2025.

Lack of member commitment to biblical marriage principles was the leading obstacle (27.7%), closely followed by pressure to accommodate modern relationship expectations (25.9%). Limited financial resources for programmes accounted for 18.8%, weak authority in enforcing marriage guidelines for 17.0%, and declining participation in marriage activities for 10.7%.

The two leading obstacles imply that secular influence has penetrated to the level of members' fundamental assumptions, placing leaders in direct competition between fidelity to tradition and cultural relevance. The resource and authority constraints imply that even willing leaders lack the means and the standing to mount an effective response, compounding the neglect evident in Table 5.

These obstacles correspond to literature describing congregational resistance and the pressure on churches to conform to secular norms (Mohler, 2020; De Villiers, 2020). Taken with the preceding tables,

the results show that the five mechanisms operate as an integrated and mutually reinforcing system rather than as isolated pressures: media exposure normalises models that education validates, economic pressures incentivise individualistic choices that legal change legitimises, and declining participation removes the communal counterweight, a cumulative dynamic well captured by the disenchantment perspective (Dhima & Golder, 2021; Stolz, 2020).

VII. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that secular ideologies challenge Friends Church marriage principles in Trans Nzoia County through five reinforcing mechanisms: media and social-network influence, Western education promoting individual autonomy, economic pressures, political and legal change, and declining church participation.

These mechanisms have produced significant and measurable changes in marriage practice and stability, with a clear majority of respondents perceiving substantial secular impact. Crucially, secular influence operates not as a set of isolated pressures but as an integrated system whose components reinforce one another, so that secularisation in this setting functions less as an external assault than as an internalised reconfiguration of how marriage is understood and lived. Set against this, current institutional responses are dominated by accommodation and are inadequate to the scale and intensity of the challenge.

VIII. RECOMMENDATION

On the strength of these findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. The Friends Church should reinforce biblical teaching on marriage across all its programmes, presenting covenantal marriage as a credible and attractive alternative to secular relationship models.
2. Church leaders should receive structured training in marriage counselling and family ministry so that engagement with marriage challenges becomes systematic and preventive rather than crisis-driven.

3. Traditional marriage preparation and communal discernment processes, including Meeting clearance, should be restored and strengthened to re-establish community accountability.
4. Mentorship and youth-outreach initiatives should be developed to support younger couples and to transmit Friends marriage testimonies across generations.
5. Digital and social media should be used constructively for marriage formation and support, countering rather than ceding the channel through which much secular influence travels.
6. Families should be supported to instil Christian marriage values in the home, and adequate resources should be allocated to sustain marriage-focused ministry.

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