Message from the Editor: Secularization in Africa?

Michael Parker (mike.parker@etsc.org) Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo

In the years following the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, the United States has waged two wars in the Middle East, there have been numerous Islaminspired terrorist attacks throughout the world, and the Middle East has experienced the Arab Spring. In the field of popular culture, a number of writers have responded to the rise of religionrelated violence by rejecting religion altogether. These writers include Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens.

While in the past atheists such as Nietzsche have recognized the moral value of religion but rejected it on epistemological grounds, the "New Atheists" have seen religion not only as irrational but as dangerous in that it inspires violence as well as social policies and attitudes that are against the general interests of modern society. The later include Christian approaches to abortion, contraception, and homosexuality. Christians have mounted a vigorous response to these thrusts, as can be seen in the books of Dinesh D'Souza, Alister McGrath, and others. Nonetheless, the general trend in the West toward increased secularization is continuing unabated, and the recent attacks on religion in general have helped to provide an intellectual undergirding for this trend.

While secularization in the West is a well-established fact, the same trend in Africa is hardly known or even recognized today. Scholars and Christian leaders, however, are increasingly encountering and studying the issue. To further this effort, the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo hosted a consultation on the subject, "Declining Religious Participation: Secularization and

Cairo Journal of Theology

Discipleship in Africa," held December 11 and 12, 2014. The consultation was sponsored by the Reformed Mission League (its Dutch acronym is GZB) of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, and it came at the initiation of Herman Paul, a professor of secularization studies at the University of Groningen.

Attended by about a dozen scholars from Africa, North America, and Europe, the participants generally agreed that their work was largely preliminary and that the subject is important and will no doubt increase in importance in coming years. Paul's positioning paper and five of the papers presented and discussed at the consultation were later revised and appear as articles below. A summary of the conclusions and recommendations reached at the consultation is included in a final article, jointly written by Benno van den Toren and Willem J. de Wit.

Though the subject is new and perhaps will strike many readers as counterintuitive, it is clear from the evidence given at the consultation that the rise of secularization in Africa is a real phenomenon that, for all people of faith, is both significant and urgent.