

Western Secularism, African Worldviews, and the Church

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John Mbiti, the African theologian, describes Africans as ‘notoriously religious’.¹ By this he refers to the characteristic of African society to find answers to the questions of life in the spiritual and mystic world. Secularism, on the other hand, is the complete opposite. The term was used in 1846 by George Jacob Holyoake to describe a philosophy of life that regulated life by empirical experience and reason and sought human improvement through service.² As a worldview it finds the answers to the questions of life in this life.

In the modern globalized world the conceptual principles and values of secularism as a philosophy of life are exported to Africa and so challenge the prevailing worldview. This is the context of the mission of the church in Africa. This paper will explore some of the issues for the church to address that arise from the dialectic relationship between African worldviews and Western human secularism.

Secularism is a Western Philosophical System

At the simplest level the term *secular* simply means to be concerned with the affairs of this world as opposed to that of the sacred, monastic, or ecclesiastical. Secularism as a process is the

¹ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heineman, 1969),

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² George Jacob Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism*, Gutenberg Project, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36797/36797-h/36797-h.htm> (accessed November 24, 2014).

demythologizing of life. Spiritual answers to the questions of life give way to answers based in observable cause and effect. Once it was believed that consumption was caused by a person sucking the life out of another through witchcraft. Today it is identified with the tuberculosis bacteria that can be treated through antibiotics. As human understanding of the physical mechanisms of world grows, so life is increasingly demystified and therefore secularized.

Secularization however is more than a demystifying process. In its form as a philosophy, commonly called secular humanism, it pervasively informs the religious and cultural identity of Western society.³ This philosophy was born from Western philosophical notions according to which humanity is free, is independent, and has come of age.⁴

It builds its values and opinions on that which can be tested by the experience of this life. The concept of God is superfluous in secularism. Humanity now lives solely out of, by, and toward this life, which is a closed self-sufficient biological and material system. Morality in secular humanism still holds to vestiges of Christian values but is Christian ethics “shorn of its doctrine.”⁵ In the world of global contact, the power advantage that technology and development has given the West enables it to export these values to Africa through several channels:

The agenda of Western political structures. Western aid is tied to secular philosophy. Funding is tied to achieving the goals of the secular humanists’ agenda, such as pro-choice.

The education system. The education system offered in Africa today, state or private, has been entirely borrowed from the western colonial powers of France, Britain and Portugal and is governed by certain suppositions and axioms, many of which can be

³ Graeme Smith, *A Short History of Secularism* (London: L. B. Tauris, 2008), 7.

⁴ B. J. van der Walt, *Transforming Power: Challenging Contemporary Secular Society* (Potchefstroom: ICCA, 2007), 298.

⁵ Smith, *A Short History of Secularism*.

traced back to the thinking of humanist secularists such as Dewey.

Population growth and technological advance. The certainties of the past when the African child's integration into society was through the socializing processes of culture, the custodians of which were the adults, has been turned on its head. In the sub-Saharan about 40 percent of the population is under fourteen. These children are experiencing two developments. The first is Africa's rapid transition in the use of technology. The second is new levels of material prosperity. This prosperity feeds into the sense of wellbeing and a disassociation with spiritual issues that dominated the past.

The challenge of secularism to the church in Africa is two-fold. Firstly, it is to equip the African church to respond to secularization as an inevitable process following the growth of technology and living standards. Secondly, it is to recognize that secularism is the colonizing power of Western thought. Both these require a theological response from the church.

African Values as a Philosophical System

The African response to secularism will be colored by the values of the African worldview. We will attempt to describe some of the characteristics of this.

Despite the pervasiveness of Christianity as a major religion in Africa, African culture has its own characteristics. These in the past were articulated in the structure of African religion but today continue to inform Africa's response to both Christianity and secularism. In African cultural thinking, existence is viewed in terms of an integrated and indivisible whole. All human beings and nature are animated by a basic 'vital force.' Human beings and nature are bound together in a symbiotic relationship. This relationship extends to the spiritual world. The Divine organizes and integrates humankind and the world. In traditional religious values, the ancestors are part of the whole. They exist in symbiotic relationship with the living as custodians of society or as intermediaries between the living and the dead. They mediate

social identity for the living and, together with various spirits and the Supreme Being, influence the well-being and prosperity of the individual or social group.

John Pobee claims that there are three main principles governing the way Africans look at the world.

1. The African has a deep religious ontology, which forms an integral continuum, whereby the living world is incorporated and brought under the spirit world.
2. The African identity and worldview have very strong connections. The African says: “I exist because I belong to a family.”
3. A human being’s sense of finitude, vulnerability and mortality leads many Africans to believe in the power of magic and of super-beings.⁶

The Characteristics of African Worldviews

In brief, African worldview values can be listed as follows:

A universe united in the individual. There is a close relationship between African religion and African worldview. The religion informs the worldview and the worldview informs the religion. Both are characterized by a cosmic wholeness. There is little distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the natural and the supernatural.⁷ The personal world is not separated from the self, self cannot be separated from community, and the community cannot be separated from deity.⁸

The object of this oneness is not the spiritual realm but humanity.⁹ Behind this universe is power that can be released for the sake of human prosperity and well-being. In some contexts this is called “The Good Life,” meaning the individual’s right to

⁶ J. S. Pobee, *Towards an African Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 43–45.

⁷ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: ABACUS, 1994), 12.

⁸ Constantine, M. Mwikamba, “Search for an African Identity” in *Social and Religious concerns of East Africa: A WAJIBU Anthology*, ed. G. J. Wanjohi and G. W. Wanjohi (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2005).

⁹ John S. Mbitim, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1975), 33–36.

health, wealth, prosperity, and longevity. When this is threatened, the assumption is that someone or something has taken away my “Good Life.” It is the individual who is the link that holds the forces of the universe in unity. It is as if the whole world exists for man’s sake.¹⁰ Misfortune is the result of a disruption in this cosmic flow. This disruption can be caused because someone has taken it from me through spiritual means or because of the displeasure of the spiritual powers.

The unity and the wholeness of the universe, which sees no distinction between the secular and the spiritual or divine other, has its terminus in the existence of humanity.

Time is the present. Traditional African worldview sees time as the perpetual, unquestioned present. Greater emphasis is placed on the past than the future. The future is limited and does not stretch too far into what is essentially an unfathomable reality. This present experienced reality is neither after nor before, and within it the ideal state of affairs is the indefinite repetition of the past. The concept of progress is also intimately linked to the past. Within the context of this worldview, progress is primarily the realization by a given generation of stages which others have reached before it.¹¹

Community. Relationship is a very important hermeneutic principle in the creation of understanding. It stands to reason therefore that the relationship between the group and the individual is the basis of self-understanding and identity. Desmond Tutu designates the characteristics of this relationship with the word *ubuntu*.¹²

Hierarchical leadership. Social psychologists have observed that African societies show a strongly hierarchical structure in which social power is centralized in the few. The notion of strong leadership is common, with power status and face-saving being important values. Smith provides us with a good working descrip-

¹⁰ Betsie Smith, “Worldview and Culture: Leadership in Sub-Sahara Africa,” *New England Journal of Public Policy* vol. 19, no. 1 (2003): 246.

¹¹ Smith, “Worldview and Culture,” 253.

¹² Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday/Random House, 1999), 31.

tion of traditional leadership as being derived from social status and bloodline with little to do with function and personal qualities or merit.¹³ Models of strong leadership continue to characterize leadership styles.

The Presence of African Worldview Values in Contemporary Africa

Much of the discussion on African values is derived by theologians and commentators by reflecting on the past and African Traditional Religion. A further question for our discussion is the extent to which the values that are drawn from the world of the traditional African worldview permeate the present.

To identify how worldview influences thought and behavior, we turn to the world of the cross-cultural and social psychologists who have put their minds to understanding cultural differences in social contexts. Geert Hofstede (1983) reviewed the business culture within national contexts and identified six dimensions along which cultural values that could be analysed. These are: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Long Term versus Short Term Orientation, and Indulgence versus Restraint.¹⁴

Hofstede included several African nations in his research.¹⁵ While his main concern was not the nature of the African worldview, he nonetheless gives a scholarly description of African business culture in multinational enterprises. These represent Africans who have high levels of contact with secularization. His findings indicate the presence of the same values in contemporary African society as those identified in the previous section, 2.1. African business society tends to be structured along hierarchical values; there is a distance between those in authority and those not; this hierarchy plays out in the distinction between male and female roles; this in turn is moderated by the communal and relational concern of the society that value nurture over achievement;

¹³ Smith, "Worldview and Culture," 248.

¹⁴ Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

¹⁵ The raw data is available from <http://geert-hofstede.com/kenya.html>.

the group rather than the individual is at the heart of social organization and arbitrates identity and the cultural concepts of time stress the present and have a short-term orientation.

From this research it is clear that there is a certain tenacity when it comes to worldview values. Contemporary African worldviews continue to reflect many of the fundamental values of more traditional African society. This should not be a great surprise as continuity and identity go hand in hand. The presence of these values must be considered and their impact on the churches approached in accommodating secularism considered. This does not mean however that we can correctly deduce that because of this conservatism, secularism will have no impact in Africa and therefore is not an issue for the church.

How Does Secularization Play Out in African Church?

As we review the impact of secularism on the church in Africa, there are two areas of particular concern. The first stems from the Church's mission itself and the second arises from themes in African worldview. Both of these provide hooks on to which to attach the values of secularism.

The first area of concern is the common ground between the gospel and the message of secularism. Secularism is very appealing to human nature. It looks at the development of self in terms of maximum self-fulfillment. It also has the appearance of goodness as it sees its mission as the betterment of humanity *per se* and the salvation of the planet. Many expressions of Christianity espouse the same goals. Further, if secularism is the adoption of Christian ethics without the doctrine, then much of the humanist agenda will resonate with Christian values.

The second is the common ground between the values of secularism and African worldviews. We might be excused for thinking that the philosophy of secularism has little common ground with the spiritual realities present in African worldviews. African communities however are not passive or idle in their receptivity

to global cultural flows, but answer back.¹⁶ While some values are too alien to the existing worldview to be entertained, there are others that either prove their worth or resonate with existing values and are therefore adopted into the worldview. We will shortly examine how the secular agenda, while representing a very different philosophy of life, is able to inhabit the African worldview.

The Secularizing Process of Christian Mission Activity Itself

In Genesis we find a secularizing or demystifying element in the narrative. Genesis resists the belief of Ancient Middle Eastern religion that God is manipulated through sympathetic magic and accessed in creation.¹⁷ God is above the creation and only accessed through his deliberate acts of self-revelation in word and world history. God, man, and creation (temporal and spiritual) do not form a circular continuum but are distinct from each other with all aspects of creation being equally accountable to the creator. Human access to God is not through the creation but through the divine word of communication and relationship. The dynamic of Genesis is that, rather than God being accessed in or through the creation, the creation is accessed in and through God. This intrinsic distinction that separates man, creation, and the creator continues as a demystifying challenge whenever Christianity faces polytheistic, pantheistic, or animistic religions.

Charles Kraft contends that the church has turned to secular notions to deal with spiritual power and therefore has been a secularizing influence. Seeking to assist Christian evangelism by breaking the power of the spiritual world, the Church has turned to medicine, an education system founded on secularized principles, and the adoption of science in agriculture. In all of this, it has responded to spiritual questions with secular answers and so advanced secularization.¹⁸

¹⁶ Gregg A. Okesson, "Sacred and Secular Currents for Theological Education in Africa," *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 1 (2007): 26.

¹⁷ For a full exploration of this see G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, World Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987): xlv–l.

¹⁸ C. H. Kraft, ed., *Appropriate Christianity* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 365.

The second challenge is the adaptation in many parts of the Western church of its theology to the secularizing values of the Enlightenment. One of David Bosch's contributions to mission theology was to identify the way Western Enlightenment philosophy fed into the understanding of the nature and task of mission.¹⁹ Increasingly, the Church has looked to the agenda of secular humanism and international humanitarian and political forums to define its mission. These values are fed back into the African church through Western funding bodies for mission and through scholars returning to Africa who have completed their studies in institutions dominated by this agenda.

A third but related theological trend has been the way the concept of mission has been interpreted. Stung by the accusation that mission was too spiritual or dualistic and ignored the holistic implications of the kingdom of God, the church has adopted a developmental model of mission. The trend of looking for secular answers to spiritual questions has continued, and often there is little difference between the development programs of the church and those of the secular NGOs.

African Values That Resonate with Secular Values

We now turn to receptors within African worldviews themselves. These we can term *false friends*. On the surface there is a measure of continuity between them and secularism. They seem to say the same thing as each other, but at a deeper level there is disagreement. Some of these are now explored

The secularity of cosmic religion. Harold Turner has pointed out that in much African Traditional Religion there is little or no immediate encounter with God.²⁰ The world around us becomes the sacrament of our worship. Shorter and Onyancha speak of the secularity of cosmic religion.²¹ When the physical and material becomes identified with the spirit, then the spirit becomes the

¹⁹ David J. Bosch. *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1980), 38–40.

²⁰ Referred to in Okesson, "Sacred and Secular," 52.

²¹ Awald Shorter and Edwin Onyancha, *The Church and AIDS in Africa, A Case Study: Nairobi City* (Nairobi: Pauline Press, 1998).

physical world and there is a blurring of the difference. In traditional African thought, the biological world is to be valued as it is part and parcel of the divine world.

In secularism the appreciation of nature is based on viewing man from the perspective of being one of evolution's developments. Taking one's rightful place means working with the biological world to preserve it. Sustainability and preservation of what is are key concepts. Humanity must respect this world as it is no more or less than it. To diminish creation is to diminish humanity.

In both cases the importance of the physical material world is elevated. While philosophically the route to an appreciation of the material and biological is very different between the systems, the outcome is something that each in its own way resonates.

The collective nature of the African world-view. One of the strong values of African society is its collectiveness and emphasis on collective identity. We have already seen Mbiti's "I exist because I belong to a family." This value challenges liberal epistemology's emphasis on the individual as the creator of understanding. "I know because I think" is challenged by "I know because we know." Counter-intuitively this collectivism and nurture orientation provides the opening for the secular humanist agenda of social justice, peace, and development. This addresses the communal impulses of the African worldview but with answers that use only material values.

The importance of the present. In her work on African Independent Churches, Mofokeng highlights the present as a characteristic African value.²² The spiritual world is focused on the now and immediate of my life. It is seen in the present as it brings direct benefits such as healing and prosperity. Focus is on this life rather than the next. The secular agenda also concerns itself with personal fulfillment and present wellbeing, while discounting notions of the afterlife.

²² N. H. Ngada and K. E. Mofokeng, *African Christian Witness* (Pietermaritzburg: RSA Cluster, 2001), 15.

Personal wellbeing and prosperity. Personal wellbeing and prosperity are important objectives in much of traditional religion. The ANC in South Africa can justify the sacrifice of an ox at national gatherings as being essential for the prosperity of the country. The spirit world and ancestors play an important role in ensuring this health and prosperity. When reviewed, secularism also promises fulfillment, growth, and creativity for both the individual and humankind in general.

Conclusion

The challenge of Western secularism to the African church is not straightforward. On the face of things, many aspects of African worldviews are at odds with secular human values. However, this does not mean that African worldviews are not influenced by these alien values. Cultures and worldviews are not watertight. They react to new ideas, particularly when there is an element of common ground between them and they are perceived of as being beneficial. While there are many unique aspects to African worldviews, they nonetheless have values that are open to be modified by the secular agenda. Secular values when adopted are not left unaffected but molded and conscripted to the agenda of the African values. This gives the church the opportunity to involve itself in this process of challenging both African and secular values with the transforming power of Christ.

The church in Africa addresses its culture with the gospel. This gospel makes demands on all cultures, and no culture can exist in blissful harmony with it. The philosophies of secularization and the more intuitive philosophy informing African worldviews, together with the way they interact in African society, are all critiqued by the church through a deliberate process of evaluation.

As the African church reflects on the influence of secularism on society, it needs to be critical of its own teaching and practice. For this it needs to teach a theology of God, man, and creation that allows the African believer to access the created order through God and not God through the created order. This ap-

proach keeps the centrality of the Trinity in creation, despite the de-spiritualizing process of scientific understanding and growing prosperity. Furthermore, the church should be able to identify the characteristics of its mission that distinguish it from global development agencies. Again, this is a theological task.