

African Neo-Pentecostalism in the Face of Secularization: Problems and Possibilities

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Introduction

Africans,¹ particularly sub-Saharan Africans, are often considered “notoriously religious”² or “incurably religious.”³ This article challenges that assumption by looking at one of the most unlikely movements to consider if one wants to do so: African neo-Pentecostalism. For many Western observers, neo-Pentecostal or neo-charismatic movements seem to be paradigmatic expressions of the religious outlook that characterizes Africa. These movements can also be used as proof that this religiousness not only belong to Africa’s past but is equally expressed among the rising middle class of urban professionals. Neo-Pentecostalism thus provides an expression of an “alternative modernity,” which shows that secularization is not a necessary consequence of modernity.

I agree that African neo-Pentecostalism shows that alternative modernities do exist. Modernity does not automatically lead to secularization, as the older secularization thesis presupposed. In

¹ This article is based on a public lecture at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo as part of the consultation on “Declining Religious Participation: Secularization and Discipleship in Africa” that was jointly sponsored by the Seminary and GZB (Reformed Mission League, the Netherlands). I want to express my thanks to the sponsors of this important consultation and the other participants for their fruitful interactions on this theme.

² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1969), 1; cf. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 25f.

³ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Religion in Africa* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 235.

this article, I intend to show, however, that the relationship between neo-Pentecostalism and secularization is more complex than it initially appears. For a number of reasons, neo-Pentecostalism could be a Christian response to secularization, but it could also be a factor contributing to Africa's secularization. The jury is still out.

I reflect on this movement as someone who comes from the Netherlands, one of the most secular countries in Europe, but also as someone who has lived in Central Africa for eight years. As such, this essay is part of an intercultural theological conversation between two continents that has been unfolding in my own life and is intended as a contribution to an intercultural theological conversation in the global church. I hope that these reflections will help Western Christians reflect on whether, and, if so, to what extent, African neo-Pentecostalism can help us develop a Christian position in a secular post-Christendom society. I also hope that these reflections might help African Christians reflect on what the appropriate response might be to secularizing forces in modern Africa. As this is a short article, it can obviously be no more than an invitation to others to join me in a conversation on these wide-ranging issues.⁴

In the first section I discuss different forms of secularization in sub-Saharan Africa, arguing that it can easily go unnoticed because it expresses itself in different ways. I will argue that one form, which plays a dominant role, is easily missed when looking at sub-Saharan Africa from a modern secular perspective. In the second section I introduce the broad cluster of movements that are grouped under the label of neo-Pentecostalism. I give particular attention to their relationship with the traditional African worldview, naturally focusing on those traits that are crucial to understand their relationship with secularization. In the third section, I will argue that neo-Pentecostal movements may be part of the answer to secularization, but are themselves also vulnerable to

⁴ For the understanding of intercultural theology that undergirds this article, see Benno van den Toren, "Intercultural Theology as a Three-Way Conversation: Beyond the Western Dominance of Intercultural Theology," *Exchange* 44 (2015): 123–43.

secularizing processes. I will indicate why further research is needed and give some pointers as to the direction in which neo-Pentecostal theology and praxis will need to be developed in order to allow for a truly Christian response to secularization, a response that could also be a gift to Christian communities in the global North.

An African Form of Secularization?

Secularization is a multifaceted phenomenon. Because of this, one can often miss crucial forms of secularization when one looks for phenomena relating to one or a limited range of expressions. Overt atheism, agnosticism or, more generally, the erosion of belief in the supernatural is rare in sub-Saharan Africa, but other forms are clearly identifiable. In an earlier article, I have distinguished a number of these expressions,⁵ and I limit myself here to some short observations.

A first expression of secularization is probably better called *de-sacralization* or *disenchantment* of the world. According to many theologians, it has its roots in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures themselves. This becomes clear when we compare the biblical worldview to the worldviews of the pagan environment of Israel and the early church. In these contexts, human beings were surrounded by all sorts of spiritual forces and sacred powers with which they needed to carefully negotiate. By the declaration in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures that this world is God's creation, it is de-sacralized. Political powers are no longer sacred and can therefore be criticized. Fertility is demystified and depends on the Creator God rather than on the mastery of magical powers. Illness is no longer demonized and we can therefore look for natural treatments.⁶ By introducing a biblical worldview of a de-

⁵ Benno van den Toren, "Secularisation in Africa: A Challenge for the Churches," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 22, no. 1 (2003): 3–30.

⁶ See, e.g., Friedrich Gogarten, *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit: Die Säkularisierung als theologisches Problem* (Stuttgart: Friedrich Vorwerk Verlag, 1953); Arend Theodoor van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History: The Meeting of the Faiths of East and West* (London: Edinburgh House Press,

sacralized world, Christianity itself has been a secularizing force in Africa.⁷

A second form of secularization is the declining participation of individuals in religious activities. Though limited studies are available, it can be identified in a number of places. For example, though it is hard to present precise data, research shows that church attendance is low among Nairobi's urban poor.⁸

A third expression of secularization is the diminishing authority over or grip on society that religion has as more and more areas of life become emancipated from its influence. This is a consequence of the increasing differentiation or pluralization of society since the arrival of colonization, modernity, and globalization. In traditional Africa, all areas of life were integrated and intertwined and therefore also permeated by the religious aspect of life. In the modern era, many areas of life, such as commerce, politics, the media etc., gradually establish their own dynamic and independence from religion.

In the fourth place, the relationship between the individual and his or her religion has changed under the influence of modernity. As Charles Taylor has pointed out, secularization does not necessarily mean that people become less religious, but it does mean that religion is never self-evident, that it is always a matter of choice, and that religious commitment is always made in the face of alternative options.⁹ Recent sociological research amongst civil servants in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, shows that this phenomenon can also be seen in Africa: all civil servants interviewed were practically involved in their religious communities, whether Protestant, Catholic or Muslim. Yet, the relationship to these communities had changed in a manner that would not have

1964); Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1966).

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), 58; Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 18.

⁸ Aylward Shorter and Edwin Onyancha, *Secularism in Africa: A Case Study: Nairobi City* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997), 57ff.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 12.

been possible before the influence of modernity: the individuals retained a certain autonomy vis-à-vis their religious communities and viewed their adherence increasingly as a matter of personal choice.¹⁰

A fifth expression of secularization, which will receive the most attention in this article, is the secularization of religion itself, its adaptation to the values of the secular culture.¹¹ In the West, this often takes the form of adapting religious beliefs to a secular worldview. Belief in miracles, in the authority of Scripture, and in heaven and hell may become less important, or can even be denied, while continuing a religious affiliation and religious practices. In sub-Saharan Africa the secularization of religion itself may take a different form. In Africa religious practices often retain a strong sense of the supernatural but can be secularized by *using these religious practices for secular goals*. How many politicians will go to their village to consult their ancestors, ask for prayer from their pastor, or see a *marabout*, not for any inherently religious purpose, but in order to succeed in their political careers? How many students will wear an amulet or acquire a “prophetic pen” or other blessing in their churches, not because they want to be closer to God, but because they need this supernatural power to succeed in a hostile world? These examples could be multiplied.

If this is considered secularization, it is a secularization of the Christian religion because the Christian faith is in its intention is a theocentric religion that resists the utilitarian use of its practices. This is different for African Traditional Religions (ATRs). Many studies of these religions – including those by scholars who intend to understand these religions positively – have stressed the

¹⁰ Abel Ngarsolede, “Enjeux théologiques de la sécularisation en Afrique subsaharienne : Une étude de cas de N’Djamena en République du Tchad” (Thèse de doctorat, Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui, 2012), 129ff.

¹¹ This fourth form is distinguished as a particular expression of secularization by the Dutch sociologist of religion G. Dekker: G Dekker and K. U Gäbler, eds., “Secularisatie in de westerse samenleving,” in *Secularisatie in theologisch perspectief* (Kampen: Kok, 1988), 32.

anthropocentric and pragmatic nature of these religions.¹² They are anthropocentric in the sense that religious practices are focused on the flourishing of the human being or, rather less individualistically, of the clan. They are pragmatic in the sense that religious practices are used in view of what they are intended to achieve: protection, healing, or blessing. This is one reason why the traditional African worldview is vulnerable to secularization.¹³

This may be one of the reasons why secularization processes in Africa can so easily go unperceived by the Western observer. For Westerners, religion seems to be everywhere in Africa because the “supernatural” is everywhere. People are very aware of supernatural powers and their influence on all aspects of daily life. Automatically considering everything “religious” that from a Western perspective is considered “supernatural” is, however, a misconception. First of all, many phenomena considered “supernatural” by Westerners are not “supernatural” in a theological sense. Deceased ancestors, water spirits, and the power of charms are beyond what the materialistic Western worldview considers natural, but for Africans they are still part of the created order. Their understanding of the created order is, however, much larger than the Western materialistic view, but that does not necessarily make these aspects of life religious. And secondly, as already pointed out, these “spiritual” practices may be used in order to attain what we might consider “secular” goals. As Kwasi Weridu observes,

The procedures [religious practices] associated with the belief in sundry extra-human beings of varying powers and inclinations, so often given pride of place in accounts of African reli-

¹² Magesa, *African Religion*, 69; cf. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*; Okot p' Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970).

¹³ Eloi Messi Metogo, *Dieu peut-il mourir en Afrique? Essai sur l'indifférence religieuse et l'incroyance en Afrique noire* (Paris; Yaoundé, Cameroun: Karthala; Presses de l'UCAC, 1997), 47ff.

gions, are in fact practical utilitarian programs for tapping the resources of this world.¹⁴

This confronts us with the issue of how we should define secularization. Because it relates to decreases in the influence of religion, the definition of secularization depends on a more basic definition of religion. Scholars of religion are increasingly aware that it is impossible to formulate a culturally and religiously neutral definition of religion. A definition of religion always presupposes a particular understanding of what religion is or is supposed to be.¹⁵ This also allows room to define religions from a Christian perspective. It seems that from such a Christian perspective the God-directed focus should be a central element of true religion in distinction from all sorts of semi- or even pseudo-religious practices that can only be understood with reference to what religion truly should be.¹⁶

This is one of the reasons why we need to look critically at the thesis that Africa is incurably religious, not only in relation to Africa's present, but also in relation to Africa's past. In order to assess this thesis, it is insufficient to point to the pervasiveness of the "supernatural" in the Western sense or to simply point to the fact that no, or very few, areas of life are lived without reference to the supernatural. One would first need to look at the question of what place is given to God the Creator himself. Here one finds very different assessments of ATRs, depending on whether one considers the relationship with a whole range of intermediate spiritual powers as effectively being a mediated relationship with

¹⁴ Kwasi Wiredu, "The Moral Foundations of African Culture," in *Philosophy from Africa*, ed. A.P.J. Roux and P. H. Coetzee, 2nd ed. (Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa, 2002), 288.

¹⁵ Cf. Christoph Auffarth and Hubert Moher, "Religion," *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, ed. Kocku von Stuckrad, trans. Robert R. Barr (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

¹⁶ B. van den Toren, "Religion," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell and Daniel J. Treier (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic; Brazos Press, forthcoming).

the Creator¹⁷ or rather as an expression of a this-worldly focus¹⁸ that eclipses the relationship with God.¹⁹ A further question is how central the relation with religious realities (however understood) was in pre-colonial Africa. There are only sparse data on this issue. The data that do exist, from Ghana for example, do, however, reflect the pragmatic and anthropocentric approach to religion noted above. Jan Platvoet and Hank van Rinsum note, rather polemically:

Religious practice usually consisted in brief bursts of high-intensity religious communication, when some calamity – death, illness, or some other misfortune – had struck [...] [The permeation of] other domains of Akan and Ju/'hoan social life [...] varied considerably, per society, per “institute,” and per event. [...] And thirdly, if present, it was more often a minor side affair than central and crucial.²⁰

Neo-Pentecostalism as a Contextual Christianity for Modern-Day Africa

In order to assess African neo-Pentecostalism in relation to the processes of secularization in Africa, we will first need to establish its particular character as a contextual Christian movement that is both deeply rooted in Africa's pre-colonial worldview and at the same time closely related to Africa's present, characterized by modernity, urbanization, and globalization. I use the label *neo-*

¹⁷ E. Bọlaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* ([London]: Longmans, 1962).

¹⁸ So p' Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*.

¹⁹ Keith Ferdinando, “Screwtape Revisited: Demonology Western, African and Biblical,” in *The Unseen World: Christian Reflections on Angels, Demons, and the Heavenly Realm*, ed. Anthony N.S. Lane (Carlisle; Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press; Baker Book House, 1996), 103–32.

²⁰ Jan Platvoet and Henk J. van Rinsum, “Is Africa Incurably Religious? Confessing and Contesting an Invention,” *Exchange* 32, no. 2 (2003): 144. For further discussion of the thesis see Kehinde Olabimtan, “‘Is Africa Incurably Religious?’ II, A Response to Jan Platvoet & Henk van Rinsum,” *Exchange* 32, no. 4 (2003): 322–39; Jan Platvoet and Henk J van Rinsum, “‘Is Africa Incurably Religious?’ III, A Reply to a Rhetorical Response,” *Exchange* 37, no. 2 (2008): 156–73.

Pentecostalism to refer to a cluster of movements that may otherwise be referred to simply as African Pentecostalism,²¹ new charismatic churches,²² or simply the charismatic movement.²³

This cluster of movements is not united by a central organization nor by a precise doctrinal profile but rather by a set of characteristics – not necessarily all equally pronounced – that distinguishes them from the mainline missionary churches in Africa, African Independent Churches (AICs), and classical Pentecostalism. Neo-Pentecostal churches are unlike the missionary churches planted by the modern mission movement in that they are founded by African leaders and their theology is thoroughly contextualized, taking up central elements of African Traditional Religions and worldview.

They share their emphasis on the extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit with the classical Pentecostal churches but can be distinguished from these churches not just by their African origins, but also by the different emphases in their spirituality and praxis. Following 1 Corinthians 12, classical Pentecostalism stresses the fact that all those baptized with the Spirit have received gifts with which they can serve the body of Christ. It is therefore an anti-hierarchical movement, unlike neo-Pentecostalism which attributes great authority to the founding and current leaders. Classical Pentecostalism privileges the gifts of tongues (*glossolalia*) and of healing. Healing remains central in neo-Pentecostalism, but the importance of tongues diminishes in comparison to the ministry of deliverance. Neo-Pentecostalism generally puts a great emphasis on prosperity and power, although the movement itself encompasses a range of positions concerning the role of “health and wealth” in the Christian life.²⁴

²¹ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²² Cf. Peter Hocken, *The Challenges of the Pentecostal, Charismatic and Messianic Jewish Movements* (Ashgate, 2009), 29ff.

²³ Joseph Bosco Bangura, “The Charismatic Movement in Sierra Leone (1980–2010): A Missio-Historical Analysis in View of African Culture, Prosperity Gospel and Power Theology” (VU University, 2013).

²⁴ See, e.g., *ibid.*, 178–80.

In most of these respects, neo-Pentecostal churches resemble AICs, and the movements are sometimes grouped together.²⁵ There are, however, crucial differences. AICs tend to give a relatively positive evaluation of African traditions and look for a positive relationship between elements from ATRs and Christian traditions. Though, as we will see, neo-Pentecostalism fits well with a number of crucial characteristics of the traditional African worldview, it radically rejects and condemns ATRs precisely because neo-Pentecostals take the spiritual world so seriously: involvement with traditional African religious practices is condemned as involvement with evil spirits, as blood-covenants by which one is bound to the power of the devil himself.²⁶ A further difference between neo-Pentecostal churches and AICs relates to their social base: whereas AICs thrive in and appeal to rural communities in which traditional practices are alive, neo-Pentecostal movements belong to the world of the rising urban middle-class and elites.²⁷

The strength and vitality of the movement is partly the result of this combination of a strong link with Africa's past and worldview, and an equal involvement in the needs of the present. With regards to the African traditional worldview, there are a number of important characteristics that make the neo-Pentecostal message very powerful in this cultural context.²⁸ In the first place, African neo-Pentecostalism fits with the traditional view of the universe in which spiritual powers are omnipresent. It relates to a world in which nothing happens by chance or simply

²⁵ So Harvey Gallagher Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA; Wokingham: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

²⁶ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 67, 75ff.

²⁷ Bangura, "The Charismatic Movement in Sierra Leone (1980-2010)," 237f.

²⁸ See, e.g., Ogbu Uke Kalu, "Preserving a Worldview: Pentecostalism in the African Maps of the Universe," *Pneuma* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 110-37; Cephas Omenyo, "Charismatic Churches in Ghana and Contextualization," *Exchange* 31, no. 3 (2002): 252-77; Allan Anderson, "Pentecostal Pneumatology and African Power Concepts: Continuity or Change?," *Missionalia* 19 (1990): 65-74.

by natural causes, and in which people experience deep need (1) for divination or knowledge of the spiritual causes of their distress, (2) deliverance from the powers of evil that harm and oppress them, and (3) protection against these powers. In the second place, neo-Pentecostalism fits with the traditional holistic understanding of salvation. Mission-churches tended to present salvation as mainly or exclusively spiritual. This simply does not make sense in the African traditional worldview. In ATRs spiritual wholeness is always reflected in physical and social well-being, and it is the experience of social and physical need or disaster that fuels the desire for spiritual well-being. Thirdly, neo-Pentecostalism fits well with the traditional practice of seeing material objects infused with spiritual power, particularly the power to protect and heal. Neo-Pentecostals take the power of amulets and fetishes with utter seriousness – and consequently reject them – but also provide alternatives in the forms of anointing oil, blessed water, calendars, or handkerchiefs. The question of how we evaluate these three characteristics theologically will be addressed in the last section, but for now it is clear that in all of these respects African neo-Pentecostalism is able to build powerful bridges to the African past. Compared to internally secularized forms of Christianity imported by mission churches, neo-Pentecostalism fits extremely well in a world that is highly spiritually charged.

African neo-Pentecostal movements would share most of these characteristics with AICs, but neo-Pentecostal churches are particularly adapted to the needs and expectations of the growing urban populations, particularly the new urban elites.²⁹ Let me just mention a number of areas that have been noted by others. In the first place, these churches provide new communities when the rural communities are far removed and cannot support the new life in the city. The elders and particularly the leading couple, or the ‘daddy’ and ‘mummy’ of the church community, replace the advice and authority of the elders in the village. In the second

²⁹ Bangura, “The Charismatic Movement in Sierra Leone (1980–2010),” 237f.

place, these churches present an image that is highly attractive to the new middle class and elites: churches are modern and well equipped, well represented in modern (social) media, and linked in with global networks. Thirdly, these movements fit well with the desire to be successful in an urban environment. Rather than criticizing or simply neglecting the aspirations of these new middle classes in modern cities, as traditional churches often did, these new movements see them as entirely legitimate and a sign of divine blessing. Furthermore, they promise divine help, protection, and guidance in a world where even modest success can only be achieved by overcoming enormous hurdles. These are places where you can ask for prayer when you are hoping to pass an exam in a corrupt system, when you need a visa from a Western country that continues to add more obstacles to travel, and where you can pray for a job application in a context of nepotism. Fourthly, these are churches that proclaim moral values that are more fitting to urban life than the values of traditional communities and rural churches. A crucial example is the promotion of marriage and the support for the nuclear family in a situation in which the traditional moral models of the extended family no longer provide guidance and support.³⁰ Finally, African neo-Pentecostalism fits a globalizing world in that it combines a strong African rooting with a sense of belonging to a global scene with similar movements that may relate to similar contexts and needs in other parts of the globe.³¹

African Neo-Pentecostalism and Secularization

In the last section, we have already encountered a number of hints as to how sub-Saharan neo-Pentecostalism relates to different aspects of secularization. In this final section, I want to look at the complex relationship between these movements and secularization in its multiple expressions. I will look subsequently at the five expressions of secularization distinguished in the first main

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 229f.

³¹ Cf. Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

section of this article. At the same time I will begin to raise a number of theological issues that will definitely need further exploration.

When we consider, in the first place, secularization as desecralization, neo-Pentecostalism should be considered an anti-secular movement, but from a Christian theological perspective, this does not necessarily count in its favor. We noted that this aspect of secularization is a consequence of the belief in this world as God's creation and in humankind as created in the image of God. In an important sense, neo-Pentecostalism is therefore a step back from the freedom that human beings have received over and against the mystical powers that used to control their lives. Human beings therefore allow themselves to be mastered by all sorts of spiritual powers and ideas rather than using their God-given authority to master these. Examples of this could be found during the West African Ebola outbreak that began in December 2013 in Guinea and ravaged Liberia and Sierra Leone. A number of neo-Pentecostal preachers declared the outbreak a consequence of spiritual powers and therefore encouraged their followers to look for help in spiritual deliverance rather than in the proper hygiene needed to contain the spread of the disease.³² It would, however, be wrong to simply fall back on a one-dimensional Western understanding of disease and healing. The power of these Pentecostal preachers over the population may well point to the limitation of the purely secular understanding of illness and more theological work needs to be done to develop a holistic understanding of disease and healing in which physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of illness and healing are properly integrated in a Christian theology and praxis.

In the second place, we need to note that neo-Pentecostalism is a countermovement to secularization in that it does not accept the split between different spheres of life in which religion, or more specifically the Christian faith, is only relevant for certain areas of life, but not for others. The movement is highly relevant

³² According to a newsletter from Dr. J. Bosco Bangura from 11 August 2014.

to life in modern urban centers like Lagos, Kinshasa, and Nairobi. It also relates freely to aspects of life with which the mission churches, AICs, and classical Pentecostal churches only interact with difficulty: churches pray for success in work, for the processing of documents in corrupt bureaucratic systems, and produce worship clips around a new Mercedes. God returns to the world of work, money, and success and increasingly to the world of government.

The meaning of Christ's Lordship over all spheres of life is therefore taken seriously. We do need, however, to ask the question whether He is only brought into the marketplace as Protector and Provider and whether His Lordship over the world is sufficiently taken into account. While certain values of the modern neo-liberal world are engaged with critically (for example, in the fight for transparency in government and for marriage fidelity) other values may be embraced too uncritically, such as the system of economic growth at the expense of the environment and, in general, laissez-faire economic policy. Critical dialogue between neo-Pentecostalism and liberation theology might prove fruitful in this respect.

In the third place, the highly modern character of neo-Pentecostalism (albeit a modernity that is clearly "alternative" to the Western model) helps its adherents to give shape to their Christian commitment in a context in which many others experience faith as less relevant or even irrelevant. Thus it counteracts the pressure of individual secularization under the pressures of modernization, which has rendered so many expressions of religion virtually obsolete.

Neo-Pentecostalism seems, in the fourth place, well adapted to contemporary secular society in which a religious worldview can no longer be taken for granted and for which adherence to it is always a choice that needs to be made in the face of alternatives and possible doubt. The movement places stress on personal commitment and continuous re-commitment in common with the broader Evangelical movement in which it was birthed, both originally in the Azusa Street revival and more recently in the evangelical renewal movement in Africa in the 70s and 80s of the last

century.³³ Neo-Pentecostalism may in this respect have an edge over more traditional evangelicalism through its clever use of social media, which allows it to be constantly close to the fast-paced and transient lives of its adherents in modern urban environments. Nevertheless, it may also have weaknesses in that its stress on immediate blessings and benefits may lead to large followings in the short term, but may not be sufficient when hardship comes and demands patience and endurance. Its emotionally charged meetings fit our contemporary media-savvy world but may not necessarily lead to a commitment that can survive the dreariness of much of our daily lives. Long-term commitment cannot only be based on emotional experiences but needs to be based on the recognition of the truth of the Gospel. In this respect dialogue between neo-Pentecostalism and more traditional forms of evangelicalism could prove fruitful.

The fifth and final expression of secularization in Africa that needs our attention is the anthropocentric and instrumentalist approach to religion, the use of religion for secular purposes. In this respect, neo-Pentecostalism seems at first sight to be entirely in line with the traditional African anthropocentric approach to religion in that it has a strong utilitarian side to it.³⁴ As many analysts have pointed out, this is part of its appeal.³⁵ This also then counts as its weakness because a pragmatically chosen god or religion can easily be exchanged for another one – or for secular gods – if these prove to be more effective. Robin Horton argues that this pragmatic use of religion is in fact in line with a modern scientific outlook,³⁶ and Eloi Messi-Metogo argues that it is precisely this pragmatic trait that makes the African neo-Pentecostal seem vul-

³³ See, e.g., Bangura, “The Charismatic Movement in Sierra Leone (1980–2010),” 31ff.

³⁴ Ibid., 238–40; cf. Gabriel Tchonang, *L’essor du pentecôtisme dans le monde: une conception utilitariste du salut en Jésus-Christ* (Paris: Harmattan, 2009).

³⁵ See footnote 28.

³⁶ Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion, and Science* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 161; cf. Platvoet and Rinsum, “Is Africa Incurably Religious?” (2003), 139.

nerable to secularization.³⁷ So, does neo-Pentecostalism carry the source of its own destruction in itself?

This is an area where further research and dialogue is needed in order to explore how Christian communities can build a strong faith that provides an alternative to Western models of secularization and secularized Christian commitment and that provide models for “alternative modernities.” The image is complex, and it is too easy to conclude that neo-Pentecostalism simply provides a utilitarian religion in line with Africa’s past that uses religion in the search for this-worldly blessings. In contrast to Platvoet and Van Rinsum’s description of Akan religion, neo-Pentecostalism does not simply provide a religion to which one turns in case of need or crisis.³⁸ Neither is this the religion of many secular Europeans who turn to their religion for *rites de passage* and in times of illness and personal or corporate calamity. Most adherents of neo-Pentecostal movements are deeply and regularly involved in religious practices. They attend long Sunday services, may go to regular prayer meetings, and keep in touch with their community through modern social media.

Furthermore, it is too easy and one-dimensional to consider these religions entirely anthropocentric. An analysis of worship events and worship songs in these services would show a double focus. Worship often functions like an ellipse, a form with two different centers. One focus is the blessing and deliverance experienced and expected. The other focus is God Himself as the Deliverer. In that sense they are not different from many biblical Psalms that sing the glory of the God of Israel while recounting experiences of deliverance. Neo-Pentecostal worship has many elements that are truly God-directed and other elements that focus strongly on his presence, protection, and deliverance in daily life. More analysis is needed to explore the relationship between the focus on God and the place for human needs. Is God exclusively worshiped because of His provision for us or because of Who He is? Is deliverance the proper reason for worship or, rather, one of

³⁷ See footnote 13.

³⁸ Platvoet and Rinsum, “Is Africa Incurably Religious?” (2003), 140ff.

the principle occasions for it? Is there a place for worship and trust in the face of adversity when a solution is not yet in view and might not be envisaged this side of the grave?

The results will probably be complex and varied when looking at different songs, songwriters, and movements, and even more so when looking at how different worshipers relate to God.

Such an analysis cannot only stop at a description of these different vectors in communal and individual worship. It will also need to ask theological questions that are not only important to neo-Pentecostals, but have accompanied the Christian community in many different contexts. How does one present salvation as properly holistic, touching on all dimensions of human existence, and at the same time as properly theocentric in a manner that respects that the gift of God's love surpasses by far any other gift that He can give us? How do we proclaim a holistic Gospel in a way that it properly relates to felt needs without becoming a crutch for the weak or one more joy in an otherwise self-centered existence? These questions will not just determine the spiritual health of neo-Pentecostalism and its ability provide a properly Christian alternative to secularization in Africa and elsewhere. They are part and parcel of all expressions of Christianity that seek to relate to the needs of a secular or not so secular world and yet know that the love of God is the greatest gift that one can ever receive.

Conclusion and Questions for Further Exploration and Dialogue

The jury is still out on the question of whether neo-Pentecostalism might be the answer to the threat of secular modernity that faces sub-Saharan Africa. Secularization is itself a multifaceted phenomenon and neo-Pentecostalism is far from uniform – each movement relates differently to each of the five aspects developed in this article. Therefore, it is untrue and unhelpful to present this movement as another proof that Africa is incurably religious and will not succumb to the pressures of secularization coming from the West. At the same time, it is too easy

and one-sided to write this cluster of movements off as a complete surrender to an instrumentalist approach to religion and therefore ready to give in to the secularizing powers of modernity.

Further analysis and dialogue are needed, not just in order to better understand what is going on, but also to discover what Christian faithfulness means both in Africa and in the North-Atlantic cultural sphere. This article is written in the hope of contributing to intercultural theological dialogue and learning in this area. What lessons might the secular West and older forms of mission Christianity in Africa learn from the neo-Pentecostal ability to link the Christian faith with many aspects of modern life that Christians elsewhere experience as thoroughly secular? And what would a thoroughly Christian worldview in Africa look like? Is it possible to find an alternative to a flat secular worldview that does not fall into a re-sacralization of the world, remembering that this created order is just that: created, rather than divine? And for Christians all over the world: how can we develop – and live out! – a holistic and integrated understanding of salvation that takes seriously the fact that the God of Israel has acted and still acts for our salvation but that does not make our commitment and love for Him merely pragmatically dependent on the immediacy of the blessings we experience?