

Secularization in Africa: A Research Desideratum

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When, almost half a century ago, the Roman Catholic Secretariat for Non-Believers organized a conference on “secularization in Africa,” it did so at a time when secularization theory was the reigning paradigm for the study of religion at Western universities. This is clearly visible in the conference proceedings, published in 1973 in a bilingual volume with research reports from various African countries. Although these reports were written by a diverse group of authors, including both African church leaders and European missionaries, almost all contributions tried to interpret issues of religious belonging, church attendance, and church membership through the prism of Western secularization theory. It was the work of sociologists like Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Peter Berger that provided the lenses through which “secularization in Africa” was perceived. “Secularization in Africa,” moreover, was invariably measured by the standard of “secularization in Europe.” In almost all chapters, Western examples, not seldom interpreted in quasi-apocalyptic terms, served as points of reference for understanding “secularization in Africa.”¹

Thus, when Patrick Astor from Nairobi examined “the impact of secularization” on religious life in Kenya, his definition of secularization not only followed Western models in being focused on the spread of non-Christian ideas (“Rationalism, Deism, Posivitism, etc.”) and in regarding education and “sophisticated city life” as primary sites of transmission of such

¹ *Sécularisation en Afrique? Secularisation in Africa?* (Rome: Secretariatus pro non credentibus, 1973).

ideas; it also invoked Western standards by equating secularization in Africa with growing conformity to such practices as found in the larger cities of Europe and North America:

Unchecked technology, in fact, has led the masses in the West to an artificial kind of life, exercising pressure for social conformity and cutting off man from reality and the making of personal decisions. The artificial and subnormal situation has made it possible to spread the absence of any deep moral convictions that leads, in the end, to the absence of any serious motivations beyond the appeal to self-interest.²

So, whatever the local expertise brought in by these authors in the early 1970s, their conceptual framework was heavily indebted to Western examples and theories.

Wasn't this somewhat ironic? In their attempts to identify the sources of secularization in Africa, almost all authors pointed to Western-style education – higher education in particular – as a major factor contributing to changing religious behavior and declining church attendance. Also, in response to the perceived “imperialism” of Western-style theology in Africa, some of the essays collected in *Sécularisation en Afrique?* argued quite passionately in favor of “contextual” or “indigenous” modes of theology, based on “African” rather than “Western” assumptions about God, humankind, and the world.³ Yet in thinking about “secularization,” they made not a single attempt to free this concept from Western connotations or to challenge its indebtedness to Western experiences, let alone to develop an alternative African definition or to drop the term in favor of another, “indigenous” African concept.

When, almost twenty years later, the volume *Mission in African Christianity* (1993) appeared, based on a conference in Sa-

² Patrick Astor, “Modern Civilization and Religious Life in Kenya: The Impact of Secularization,” *ibidem*, 136.

³ Likewise, Charles Chikezie Agu, *Secularization in Igboland: Socio-Religious Change and its Challenges to the Church Among the Igbo* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989) strongly suggested that “incarnational” African theology might serve as a remedy to Western-style secularization.

gana, Kenya, little seemed to have changed. When, for example, J. N. K. Mugambi from the University of Nairobi presented his views on secularization, he drew heavily on Harvey Cox, the once-famous American author of *The Secular City* (1965), in arguing that “the cosmopolitan confrontations of city living” tend to expose “the relativity of the myths and traditions men once thought were unquestionable.” Although Mugambi joined the authors mentioned above in calling for “indigenization and inculturation” of the Gospel, all the footnotes of his article referred to English-language literature. And although the author perceptively observed that much of Western social-scientific reflection on urbanization was based on a “linear model of history,” he made no attempt at identifying the presuppositions of Western secularization theory. His understanding of secularization was fully modeled after Western examples.⁴

One wonders: why did none of these authors in the 1970s or 1990s observe a discrepancy or incongruity between their desire to develop an African theology and their rather uncritical use of Western secularization theory? Why did nobody, as far as I can see, raise the question of what an African alternative to the Western concept of “secularization” might look like?

Beyond the secularization paradigm

Admittedly, this is an anachronistic and, ironically, typically Western question. As for its anachronism, it is obvious that the question whether we can think of alternatives to Western secularization theory, especially in trying to understand religious change in Africa, has gained currency only after the secularization paradigm in Western academia has fallen into disgrace. This was not yet the case in the early 1970s. By that time, Peter Berger was still prophesying that 21st-century Christians would “be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular

⁴ J. N. K. Mugambi, “Christian Mission in the Context of Urbanization and Industrialization in Africa,” in *Mission in African Christianity: Critical Essays in Missiology*, ed. A. Nasimiyu-Wasike and D. W. Waruta (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1993), 75–76, 82, 74.

culture.”⁵ Although the situation had changed by the early 1990s, after the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and the growth of the Religious Right in the United States, among many other things,⁶ it took a while before the debate on the limits of secularization theory had reached a stage in which it counted as problematic to rely on secularization thinkers such as Cox and Berger (Rodney Stark pronounced his famous *requiescat in pace* for secularization theory as late as 1999.)⁷ Only when, in the 1990s and early 2000s, growing numbers of scholars came to question the legacy of twentieth-century secularization theory, a space for thinking about alternatives began to emerge. So the question whether we can think of alternatives to Western-style secularization is clearly a late twentieth, early twenty-first-century question.

Apart from this, the question is, to some extent, a typically Western one, not merely in the sense that academic debates on “the post-secular” have often taken place at Western universities,⁸ but also because a growing awareness of the limits of secularization theory is especially found among churches that feel embarrassed about their previous appropriation of the secularization paradigm. A good example is the British Centre for Church Growth Research in Durham, led by David Goodhew, who argues that Western churches hardly seem to believe anymore in the possibility of church growth, because “church leaders and churches have consciously or unconsciously internalized both the secularization thesis and its eschatology of decline, thereby creating an

⁵ “A Bleak Outlook Is Seen for Religion,” *The New York Times* (25 February 1968).

⁶ Jeffrey K. Hadden, “Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory,” *Social Forces* 65 (1987), 587–611.

⁷ Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999), 249–73.

⁸ See, e.g., *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society*, ed. Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Johathan Van Antwerpen (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

ecclesiology of fatalism.”⁹ Goodhew’s search for alternatives is therefore clearly motivated by a sense of disappointment about the degree to which Western churches have come to think about themselves in terms of secularization. Something similar applies to my own special chair in secularization studies at the University of Groningen, which was established in 2012 by two missionary organizations in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands in order to foster critical reflection on the church’s understanding and misunderstanding of secularization. After decades of failed attempts at bringing secularization in the sense of declining church involvement to an end, these organizations wanted to pause and wonder: What have been the gains and losses of understanding religious change almost exclusively in terms of secularization? What have become our blind spots, our misperceptions, or even worse, our misguided presuppositions? Are we perhaps in need of correction, not only empirically, but also theologically?

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the workshop at Cairo Theological Seminary at which the papers gathered in this issue were originally presented was sponsored by one of these organizations, the GZB.¹⁰ Consistent with its overall policy, the GZB wanted to create a moment of reflection on the terms and categories in which religious change in Africa is best approached, not merely in order to “give” something to its African partners, but also, more importantly, to “receive” something from them. What can Western churches learn from how African churches address such issues as church-leaving or declining religious involvement? To what extent can Western churches escape the “eschatology of decline” (Goodhew) inherent in much secularization thinking by appropriating African categories of analysis – a transfer in the opposite direction, so to speak, than was the case in the earlier phases of reflection referred to in the opening paragraphs of this essay? Seen from this perspective, indeed, the challenge is not to apply Western secularization theory to African case studies, but

⁹ David Goodhew, “Church Growth in Britain, 1980 to the Present Day,” in *Church Growth in Britain, 1980 to the Present*, ed. David Goodhew (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 19.

¹⁰ For more information, see their website: <http://www.gzb.nl>.

rather to examine what modes of praying, listening, thinking, and speaking about declining religious practice exist in Africa – in the hope that they may encourage Western churches to develop better (theological) resources for understanding their own situation.

This, to be sure, does not amount to a romantic idealization of the non-West (of a sort that once inspired Dietrich Bonhoeffer to visit India “in order to judge whether the solution will come from there . . . ; for otherwise things appear to be beyond repair”).¹¹ The question rather testifies, I hope, to a desire to be taught by Christians who live and worship in different times or places, in the hope that their insights can fruitfully be appropriated also beyond their immediate contexts.

Questions and suggestions

If I review more recent literature on “secularization in Africa” from this specific point of view, I see at least two promising developments. One is that empirical research has been growing both qualitatively and quantitatively since the early 1970s. While the late 1990s saw the publication of Aylward Shorter’s and Edwin Onyancha’s influential *Secularism in Africa*, based on empirical research in (once again) Nairobi,¹² Abel Ngarsoulede more recently defended a PhD dissertation on secularization in Sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on N’Djamena in Chad.¹³ Interestingly, the empirical part of Ngarsoulede’s thesis is almost entirely based on interviews with clergy and church members. Although such interviews can be notoriously unreliable as long as they are supposed to offer adequate analysis of the situation at hand, they are a wonderful source for how Christians in a specific region per-

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ökumene, Universität, Pfarramt 1931–1932*, ed. Eberhard Amelung and Christoph Strohm (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1994), 33.

¹² Aylward Shorter and Edwin Onyancha, *Secularism in Africa: A Case Study: Nairobi City* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997).

¹³ Abel Ngarsoulede, “Enjeux sociologiques et théologiques de la sécularisation en Afrique subsaharienne: une étude de cas à N’Djaména en République du Tchad” (PhD thesis, Bangui Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, 2012).

ceive the threats and opportunities facing their churches. Indeed, as Jacob Haasnoot's paper¹⁴ illustrates, it takes a minor change of perspective to treat such interviews as sources in their own right – that is, as conversations that are worth examining because they illustrate the modes of perceptions and categories of thought that African Christians in one region or another bring to issues of religious change. More research of this kind would be welcome in order to answer the question whether African Christianity has any alternatives on offer for Western secularization theory.

Even more promising, in this regard, is theological reflection of the sort recently undertaken by scholars such as Elio Messi Metogo and Benno van den Toren.¹⁵ I should add that a clear distinction between empirical research and theological reflection does not exist, if only because both Shorter and Onyancha, on the one hand, and Ngarsoulede, on the other, present their empirical findings in the context of a theological argument. In any case, despite the fact that some of this reflection still follow Western examples, the literature contains quite a few ideas and approaches that may be of interest to Christians in search of an alternative to Western secularization theory. By way of example, I mention two of them.

Mesi Metego, to start with, shows a sharp eye for the fine texture of religious practice in examining a number of “traditional African” prayers, such as collected in *Les religions de l'Afrique noire: textes et traditions sacrés* (1969). He observes that these prayers tend towards the “pragmatic” in the sense that they ask for material blessings more than that they praise the godhead. Also, in so far as these prayers are addressed to a god, they do not typically attribute to this being such Christian qualities as “provi-

¹⁴ Jacob Haasnoot, “Thinking about Discipleship in Changing Contexts: Perceptions of Church Leaders of an Episcopal Diocese in South Sudan,” *Cairo Journal of Theology* 2 (2015): 121–31, <http://journal.etsc.org>.

¹⁵ Elio Messi Metogo, *Dieu peut-il mourir en Afrique? Essai sur l'indifférence religieuse et l'incroyance en Afrique noire* (Paris: Karthala; Yaoundé: Presses de l'UCAC, 1997); Benno van den Toren, “Secularisation in Africa: A Challenge for the Churches,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 22 (2003), 3–30.

dence.”¹⁶ Interestingly, Van den Toren makes rather similar observations about Christians who “use highly supernatural practices to pursue secular goals.” Although they sing God’s praise and pray in his name, it is health and material well-being that they seek in the first place. In Van den Toren’s judgment, this “might be a form of secularization that is more specific for Africa: the secularization of religion by making religious practices – traditional, Christian or Islamic – serve secular goals.”¹⁷ These, I would say, are remarkably qualitative assessments, which as such distinguish themselves from the dominant quantitative trend in secularization studies. If secularization relates to goals that people pursue in life and to desires they hope to get fulfilled, does that imply that counting church attendance and analyzing church membership rates are not the most important things to do? Does it imply that we better focus our attention on “lived religion” at the level of praying and preaching or, more generally, on what people desire, dream of, and hope for?

Secondly, while secularization theory is typically not very specific about the nature of “the secular” as distinguished from “the religious” – secular people simply miss the gift of religious musicality, as Max Weber memorably put it – Shorter and Onyancha offer a more content-rich description of “the secular” when they argue that “consumerism” is the principal form of secularism in Kenya. This is to say that the most prevalent alternative to Christianity is not “unbelief,” but “consumer materialism.”¹⁸ Although Shorter and Onyancha do not develop this conceptually, it is only a small step from here to argue, as others have done, that consumerism itself is a (secular) religion and, consequently, that people who seek fulfillment of their desire without Jesus Christ are not “irreligious,” but committed to a different religion than Christianity.¹⁹ And if this makes sense, might

¹⁶ Messi Metogo, *Dieu peut-il mourir en Afrique?*, 48–50, 79–80.

¹⁷ Van den Toren, “Secularisation in Africa,” 12, 11.

¹⁸ Shorter and Onyancha, *Secularism in Africa*, 27, 22.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York; London: Continuum, 2004);

secularization be understood, not crudely as “becoming secular,” but more finely textured as a process of reorienting one’s desires so as to expect fulfillment in the *saeculum*, that is, the world in which one lives here and now?²⁰

Conclusion

Arguably, these questions and suggestions are premature to the extent that they only reflect some of my “aha” experiences in reading recent literature on “secularization in Africa.” These, in other words, are not necessarily the questions that African Christians themselves would raise or the insights they would like to share with their brethren and sisters in Europe. Consequently, the issues just mentioned do not intend to close down the learning process referred to above. On the contrary, they open it by illustrating that even the small body of existing scholarship on “secularization in Africa” has a lot to offer to Western Christians pondering the pros and cons of their inherited secularization paradigm. The transcultural conversation would become even richer, however, if new lines of research would be developed and new publications on “secularization in Africa” would become available. So it is not only for the benefit of African churches, but also in the interest of European ones that I hope this special issue will make a contribution to encouraging such new explorations.

Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

²⁰ I made a similar suggestion in Herman Paul, “Stanley Hauerwas: Against Secularization in the Church,” *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 29 no. 2 (2013), 26–27.