Secularization and Discipleship in Africa: Conclusions and Recommendations

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Africa has for long been considered a most religious and possibly "notoriously religious"[1] or even "incurably religious"[2] continent. Yet, some research from African cities and reports from church leaders indicate that secularization also presents a potential or very real challenge to the Church on this continent. Christian communities not only face the challenges of African Traditional Religions and Islam, but also of modernity with its secularizing influence.

This article presents the conclusions and recommendations for further research that resulted from the GZB[3] consultation "Declining Religious Participation: Secularization and Discipleship in Africa," which was held at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo on December 11–12, 2014.[4] Our consultation, consisting

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[1] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1969), 1.

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

[3] GZB is the Dutch acronym for the Reformed Mission League, an agency that reports to the synod of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (http://www.gzb.nl).

[4] This conference was an initiative of Herman Paul, GZB/IZB professor of secularization studies at the University of Groningen, whose positioning paper was discussed in absentia. For an elaborated version of this paper, see: Herman Paul, "Secularization in Africa: A Research Desideratum," *Cairo Journal of Theology* 2 (2015): 67–75, http://journal.etsc.org. The following persons presented during the consultation: Atef M. Gendy (welcome), Jacob Haasnoot, Abel Ngarsoulede, Sherif Salah, Amir Sarwat, Dick Seed, Benno van den

of current and former theological educators from different parts of Africa, explored what the influence of secularization and the related declining religious participation might mean for Christian discipleship in Africa and how theological education and ministerial training should respond to this. Together we arrived at the following considerations, initial conclusions, and recommendations for further research.

Secularization and Declining Religious Participation

First of all, we needed to address the question of whether the term *secularization* is actually appropriate to describe these African processes or whether it is a Western notion that cannot be validly applied to this continent. At the very least, in exploring secularization in Africa, we should not simply import Western notions of secularization.

Moreover, the definition of secularization presupposes an understanding of religion. The Western notion of secularization associates religion with the supernatural and sees a strong supernatural interest in traditional and contemporary Africa. Westerners, therefore, tend to perceive Africa as profoundly religious, but this aspect of African Traditional Religion simply means that traditional Africans have a multi-layered understanding of the created order, not necessarily that they give a greater place to the Creator.

Africa provides examples that modernity does not automatically lead to secularization, as the older secularization thesis argued. Africa shows that there are "multiple modernities," such as modern expressions of otherwise "conservative Islam" or various Neo-Pentecostalisms. Yet, in many areas, even in more rural areas of South Sudan, modernity is seen as a challenge to Christian

commitment that is distinguished from and added to the challenge of African Traditional Religion.[5]

Whereas Christians and others in the West tell stories of how secularization has affected Christianity and the church, there is currently very little "secularization discourse" happening in Africa, and we are not aware of dominant "secularization stories" that need to be critically analyzed. In this sense the situation is different from Europe where stories of secularization have become so dominant that the stories themselves have enforced the secularization process.[6] In Africa the risk is not that we might inadvertently contribute to secularization by telling unwarranted secularization stories, but rather that secularization processes remain hidden because they are not expected in such a religious continent or because secularization takes different forms than those common in the West.

A potential secularization story for Africa might go like this: before colonization Africa was a deeply religious continent in which religion permeated all aspects of life. The arrival of modernity planted the seeds of secularization and Christianity was an important contributor to this process (a) through its worldview, (b) through its contribution to the development of religious pluralism and therefore to the diminishing grip of any one authoritative religious system on life and society, and (c) through the importation of Western education, hospitals and the like.[7] This secularization story should be critically evaluated: was pre-colonial Africa as deeply and comprehensively religious as this story suggests?[8] Can we conclude that Africa is now much more secular than before, or is the picture more nuanced?

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[5] See especially 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.

[6] See Herman Paul, "Secularization in Africa" and his other publications on this topic.

[7] Cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998).

[8] Jan Platvoet and Henk J. van Rinsum, "Is Africa Incurably Religious? Confessing and Contesting an Invention," *Exchange* 32, no. 2 (2003): 123–53.

For example, church leaders of South Sudan tell a story of spiritual decline after the end of the civil wars even while reporting numerical growth in the same period.[9] This may tell us that "stories of decline" have a certain attraction, which may need to be replaced by alternative stories, possibly stories in terms of new challenges and new opportunities.

As for secularization and African Traditional Religion, the notion that traditional Africa is deeply and "incurably" religious may need to be examined. African traditional society and religion have a number of characteristics that can actually promote secularization such as (a) the focus of African Traditional Religions on immediate and this-worldly health and blessing, (b) the anthropocentric and instrumentalist attitude toward religion, and (c) the remoteness of the creator God.[10]

A further point of caution is that regional differences should be taken into account when speaking about secularization in Africa. There are important differences between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa and between rural and urbanized areas, with the Republic of South Africa being a unique case. One generalized story about secularization in Africa may not work.

For example, in the wake of the Arab Spring and the tensions around the Morsi government, Egypt has seen a sudden surge in interest in atheism.[11] It is not clear yet whether this is incidental to a specific historic context or whether it might also happen elsewhere in Africa. In Rwanda higher education has a secularizing influence,[12] which may also be the case in other parts of Africa, but this cannot simply be assumed.

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[9] See Jacob Haasnoot, "Thinking about Discipleship in Changing Contexts."

[10] 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). See also Dick Seed, "Western Secularism, African Worldviews, and the Church," *Cairo Journal of Theology* 2 (2015): 76–87.

[11] Amir Sarwat addressed this issue during the conference.

[12] See Adriaan Verwijs, "Growing in Christ on African Soil: Thoughts on Enhancing the Contextualization of Discipleship Training in Rwanda," *Cairo Journal of Theology* 2 (2015): 132–51, http://journal.etsc.org.

There is very limited field research on the precise extent of secularization in Africa. For the last two decades, we could find research on sub-Saharan Africa only for Yorubaland,[13] Nairobi,[14] and N'djamena.[15] These incidental data give evidence of the reality of certain forms of secularization and religious indifference. Yet, because there is no detailed information about religious participation in Africa's distant or recent past and because the research has not been done over a stretch of time, they cannot prove a process of increasing secularization and/or religious indifference.

Even though, in the light of the above, the exact extent and possible increase of secularization in Africa cannot be determined, a number of forms in which secularizations occurs have become apparent that constitute opportunities and/or challenges for Christian discipleship:[16] (a) secularization as the desacralization of nature and political authority; (b) secularization as the diminishing religious participation of individuals and communities; (c) secularization as the withdrawal of different aspects of life and society from the influence of religion; (d) secularization as the changing authority of religion over individuals in which both the adherence to the religion and the shape of one's religious life increasingly becomes an issue of personal choice and commitment;[17] and (e) secularization as the use of religious means for secular goals.

The last point may well be a form of secularization that is stronger in Africa than elsewhere because it builds on the anthropocentric and instrumentalist character of African Traditional

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[13] Abiola T. Dopanu, "Secularization, Christianity and the African Religion in Yorubaland," *African Ecclesial Review* 48, no. 3 (n.d.): 139–56.

[14] Aylward Shorter and Edwin Onyancha, Secularism in Africa: A Case Study: Nairobi City (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997).

[15] Abel Ngarsoulede, "Enjeux théologiques de la sécularisation en Afrique Subsaharienne : Une étude de cas de N'Djamena en République du Tchad" (Doctoral thesis, Faculté de Théologique Evangélique de Bangui, 2012).

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

[17] Ngarsoulede, "Enjeux théologiques de la sécularisation en Afrique Subsaharienne."

Religions. Christian practices themselves may be secularized because they are used to obtain immanent and this-worldly blessings, healing, and protection, rather than with a focus on God and eternity. Westerners may not immediately perceive the "secularization" that such practices have undergone because they may still look very "supernatural."

Discipleship and Theological Education

The notion of secularization is relevant for the discussion of discipleship in Africa. Whereas problems of Christian commitment and discipleship in sub-Saharan Africa are often discussed in terms of syncretism with traditional African religious practices, the concept of secularization is at times a better lens through which to see the issue. It allows the researcher to explore the specific challenges for evangelization and discipleship that are related not to the influence and appeal of African Traditional Religions but rather to that of secular modernity.

If we want to formulate a meaningful Christian response to secularization, we should face the challenge of how this concept relates to unavoidable processes such as urbanization, pluralization, and the differentiation of society. This in turn will help distinguish between processes that need to be resisted and that demand faithfulness to what discipleship has always meant and processes that cannot be resisted and that demand new forms of discipleship in changing contexts.

Discipleship itself is a biblical calling, but it is at the same time a popular buzzword in some Western and African churches. The word is itself is not a solution for every ill. We need to reflect on what discipleship should look like and what aspects of discipleship are essential in forming answers to secularization and "nominal Christianity." We believe that it should have at least the following characteristics:

Discipleship means living in freedom. In answer to the tendency to search for freedom outside Christianity and the church

in a secularly conceived autonomy, persons should be invited to find freedom at the core of the Christian faith, in Jesus Christ.[18]

Models of discipleship and discipleship training should be contextually appropriate.[19] For example, Christian discipleship in urban, plural, and fast moving contexts demands a different type of commitment than in more homogenous and stable societies. This commitment also needs regular maintenance and renewal in the face of sometimes hostile, often simply indifferent, but always changing environments. Moreover, discipleship should be contagious: it is not only about learning to follow Jesus but also about inviting others to join the circle.[20]

Discipleship should be understood and practiced in a holistic manner that touches all areas of life: in this way it reflects God's interest in the totality of life and responds to the traditional African and secular interest in immediate and this-worldly blessing. At the same time, discipleship should remain thoroughly theocentric and Christocentric, so that the attention on earthly blessings will not turn Christianity in an anthropocentric and instrumentalist religion, which potentially leads to secularization.

As for theological education, an experience of alienation from a childlike and unquestionable faith is a rather common and sometimes necessary experience of critical theological study and is in a manner also an expression of secularization. For students who find themselves in this situation, theological formation (that is, discipleship training) should help them (re)gain a post-critical joyful commitment to the triune God.

Theological studies should prepare students (a) to engage in attractive and relevant forms of proclamation and discipleship training, (b) to adopt and offer models of Christian leadership that are able to induce organizational and personal change and that

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[18] Cf. Willem J. de Wit's presentation on secularization and theological education during the conference and his *On the Way to the Living God: A Cathartic Reading of Herman Bavinck and an Invitation to Overcome the Plausibility Crisis of Christianity* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2011), esp. 9, 162, 173, http://willemjdewit.com/living-god.

[19] See Verwijs, "Growing in Christ on African Soil."

[20] See ibid.

themselves reflect the values of Christian discipleship, and (c) to engage positively and attractively with people who are influenced by secular thought or who are one-sidedly busy with or submerged in "secular" activities and sectors of society. Contextual theological training should therefore not only deal with Africa's pre-Christian traditions. The attention paid by theological education to African tradition should be placed in the wider spectrum of the different influences that shape Africa today.

Discipleship is taught and caught through concrete examples and not only through abstract ideas. Students should not only learn general models of discipleship that they can implement but should also learn to explore what faithful discipleship might look like in their specific contexts.

Possibilities and Needs for Further Research

In light of the previous conclusions and the papers presented during the conference, we have identified the following research questions. Some of these questions could be researched for a master thesis, others could be elaborated in papers for a follow-up conference, and still others could be the object of extensive field research.

First, the question of definition deserves further attention: what is a workable definition of secularization in Africa, both for Muslim majority countries and other African countries?

Second, the causes and spread of secularization need further research. Questions to consider include the following: 1. What are the inherent factors in African Traditional Religions that lead to secularization?[21] 2. What is the secularizing influence of urbanization? 3. What is the secularizing influence of the media, including social media? 4. What is the secularizing influence of education?[22] What is the influence of secularization among university students? 5. What do students (e.g., in Egypt) who read Western atheist authors make of them and how are they influ-

[21] Cf. Abel Ngarsoulede, "Sociological and Theological Perspectives on Secularization in Africa," *Cairo Journal of Theology* 2 (2015): 88–102.
[22] Cf. Seed, "Western Secularism, African Worldviews, and the Church."

enced by them? 6. What is the secularizing influence of Western theology and mission practices?

Third, the discipleship and leadership programs of the churches in Africa deserve further study and evaluation in order to gage their effectiveness in addressing secularization and other related matters. For example: 1. What does the church currently do about the secularizing influence of urbanization and is it effective? 2. Can we compare some existing *discipleship* programs in terms of their biblical faithfulness, contextual relevance, and general effectiveness? 3. Can we compare some existing *leadership* programs in terms of their biblical faithfulness, contextual relevance, and general effectiveness?[23]

Finally, some more normative theological questions ask for deeper reflection: 1. What should Christian commitment, faithfulness, and discipleship in contemporary Africa look like? 2. How can God be present in the business of everyday life? How should we think of God's presence and activity in the created order, and is there possibly a *via media* between Western secularization and the (re-)sacralization of the world as seen, for example, in African Independent Churches and African Neo-Pentecostalisms? 3. What can we learn from Neo-Pentecostalism's strong connections both to the African past and to African modernity of upcoming urban people and are there aspects of this movement about which Christians should be wary?[24]

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[23] Cf. Haasnoot, "Thinking about Discipleship in Changing Contexts" and Verwijs, "Growing in Christ on African Soil."

[24] Cf. Benno van den Toren, "African Neo-Pentecostalism in the Face of Secularization: Problems and Possibilities."