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# Secularism in Africa

### Introducing the Problem

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"Africans are notoriously religious" (Mbiti, John S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, London, Heinemann, 1969, p. 1). These opening words of Professor Mbiti's classic work *African Religions and Philosophy*, first published 30 years ago, are just as notorious as the African religiosity they purport to describe and they still correspond to most people's idea of the African reality. The picture is one of ancient religious traditions still flourishing, of Islam dominating huge swathes of the African continent, of Christians in their first fervour, of new religious movements proliferating. In contrast to this religiously edifying vision, EuroAmerica is deemed to be the home of a relentless and inexorable secularism. Western Christians fantasise about a future in which Africa will be among the last bastions of religion on earth, and from where a reverse mission may one day arise, with Africans setting forth to re-evangelise the West.

In spite of all this, Pope John Paul II, in his Post-Synodal Exhortation after the African Synod, *Ecclesia in Africa*, pointed to the growing threat of secularism in Africa. Although the subject scarcely received a mention in the speeches, messages and propositions of the Synod, the Pope wrote:

"... the rapid evolution of society has given rise to new challenges linked to the phenomena notably of family uprooting, urbanisation, unemployment, materialistic seductions of all kinds, a certain secularisation and an intellectual upheaval caused by the avalanche of insufficiently critical ideas spread by the media" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 14 Sept. 1995, no. 76). Pope John Paul spoke in several other passages about the intrusiveness of the media, and also about the "temptation to individualism" so alien to Africa's best traditions (*ibid.*, no. 43).

More than 20 years ago, in 1972, the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers held a colloquium in Uganda on secularism. The meeting took place at Ggaba National Seminary, Kampala, and it produced a set of conclusions, outlining common problems connected with the subject in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. It also drew up a list of seven recommendations for the ten countries concerned (*Conclusions of the Gaba Colloquium on Secularism*, mimeographed 1972 [copy in the author's possession]). What is interesting in this report is that the whole emphasis is placed on indifferentism and unbelief among the educated *élite*, rather than on materialism and the unsettling influences of urbanisation. Nothing whatever is said about the mass media. Consequently, the major recommendations concern religious education at thirdlevel institutions. It is interesting to compare the concerns of this Vatican colloquium in 1972, with those of Pope John Paul II in 1995. The contrast is an eloquent commentary on developments in Africa during the last 20 years. So far from the African being inherently, if not "notoriously" religious, secularism is rapidly becoming a more generalised phenomenon in the African continent, spreading from a small circle of privileged individuals to a whole society undergoing a spectacular evolution.

### Definitions and Understandings

Sacred and secular represent two different ways of experiencing the same reality. In themselves, they are not in competition or conflict. At the sacred level, reality is experienced as being under the governance of God, as the object of religious faith. The secular, on the other hand, is the same reality construed as being accessible to humanity and under its

control. The secular has nothing to do with the concept of "uncleanness", and is therefore not intrinsically opposed to the sacred.

However, human societies which are technologically unsophisticated are tempted to allow the sacred to invade the secular sphere and to discourage human initiative or innovation. This has given rise to a positive understanding of secularisation or "secularity" in which a legitimate restoration of the secular sphere is observed to take place. Such a restoration was the preoccupation of the so-called "secular theologians" of the 1960's, who proclaimed that humanity had now come of age, and that religious faith had nothing to fear from the full realisation of secular potential, and the ascendancy of the human.

Unfortunately, secularisation possesses a momentum of its own, and very soon develops into "secularism", the situation in which the secular is observed to dominate or even replace the sacred. Secularism refers to a situation in which religious faith, for one reason or another, is felt to be superfluous. It is a state in which organised religion loses its hold both at the level of social institutions and at the level of human consciousness. As such, secularism is a datum of modern society. It is a world view which, in theory and/or practice, denies the immanence of God.

Secularism may stem from explicit unbelief, the denial of the existence of God or of any religious dimension to human life. Such unbelief is rarely the product of a formal, atheistic, rational philosophy. More often, it is an allegiance to a popular myth of science as the ultimate theory of everything, a conviction that the only truths are those which are accessible to scientific observation and experiment. Basically, it is a faith in unlimited human progress, apparently confirmed by the spectacular achievements of Western technology. This faith is, however already being shaken by the current ecological crisis, and the realisation that the maintenance of material standards in Europe and North America depends on the collapse and possible elimination of vital resources. (Cf. Ludwig Bertsch, "Inculturation in Europe's Societal Situation: An Introduction", in *Yearbook of Contextual Theologies*, Missio Institute, Aachen, 1993/4, p. 104).

Consumer materialism is nowadays the most common cause of secularism. Rather than formal unbelief, it is a religious indifferentism induced by the preoccupation with material things. As Mary Douglas points out, it is the product of a world of impersonal things, a world in which personal relationships are at a minimum and in which symbolism and ritual are discounted as forms of expression in the interpretation of reality. (Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, Barrie and Rockliff, London, 1970, p. 61). In a cosmos dominated by objects, rather than persons, it is impossible to bring moral pressure to bear on the human controllers, because there is so little person-to-person communication.

Bishop Leslie Newbigin, the missiologist, goes even further in his interpretation of secularism. In his numerous writings on the subject he argues that materialism not only leads to religious indifference, but that it constitutes a real "paganism". (Cf. for example, Leslie Newbigin: *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, WCC, Geneva, 1986 and *The Open Secret*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1981). In practice, it is nothing other than the worship of what is not God. It induces a pseudoreligious attitude towards the material and towards a material understanding of reality. Secularism banishes religious belief to the private sphere of subjective opinion and elevates popular science alone to the level of public truth.

### **Some Popular Assumptions Concerning Secularism**

An important part of the secular scientific myth is the belief in human progress. Technological advances over the last 150 years have convinced many people that

secularism is the inevitable and final condition of the human race. It is popularly assumed that religion belongs to the childhood of humanity and that primitive people are naively pious, credulous and subject to the teaching of priests and magicians. With the progress of science and technology since the enlightenment, it is supposed that human beings have thrown off the shackles of religion. Such an assumption is based on popular, evolutionist theories of society. Evolutionary theories of secularism, however, must take account of a number of uncomfortable criticisms.

The most vigorous of these comes from the anthropologist, Mary Douglas, who maintains that secularism is not the exclusive outcome of modernity, but is "an age-old cosmological type ... a product of definable social experience, which need have nothing to do with urban life or modern science". (Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, op.cit., p. ix). Douglas bases her critique on a hypothesis, which is not without its own critics, that society is defined by a limited number of basic, organisational criteria, a combination of which prompt people to adopt a pragmatic attitude to life, to discount metaphysics and to make no distinction between mind and matter - in other words, to be secular. Mary Douglas believes she can identify secular cosmologies among a number of tribal peoples, including the Pygmies of the Ituri Forest.

Mary Douglas expressed these opinions more than 25 years ago, and she might well be slightly less forthright in the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The spread of secularism from the Western world to other parts of the globe is difficult to deny. It is also difficult to deny that religious certainty was a general characteristic of premodern society, while religious doubt tends to characterise modern or postmodern society. Until the aftermath of the Second World War, religious faith was still interwoven with public life in the West, and it was only the scientific community and workingclass milieu that tended to be areligious. Mary Douglas was writing at about the same time as the Vatican colloquium on secularism in Africa, and before the rapid changes of the last two decades.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the phenomenon of secularism is not explained by a simple, evolutionist scheme, and that there have been secular cosmologies in premodern societies. This fact alone should make people less certain of the final triumph of secularism for all time. In any case, the protagonists of secularism, need to explain the persistence of organised religion in the secular environment.

Other voices are not lacking which proclaim that the secular society contains within itself the seeds of its own decline and dissolution. Both Peter Berger, the American sociologist of religion, and Lamin Sanneh, the African missiologist, believe that secularism should not be seen as a more formidable opponent than it is. (Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative, Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*, London, 1980, p. 184; Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West, Christianity and the Global Cultural Process: The African Dimension*, Marshall Pickering, London, 1993, p. 225). Sanneh, in particular, sees the Western cultural project as afflicted by a moral relativism that renders it deeply flawed (Sanneh, op.cit., pp. 71, 235). Scepticism about the perennial character of modern secularism seems to be growing, and the future of secular culture may be less certain than its supporters imagine.

### **Secularism as Unbelief**

The Vatican colloquium of August 1972, already alluded to, identified a secularism in Africa which largely took the form of unbelief among intellectuals and *élites* in universities and higher educational institutions. It arose, so the meeting concluded, from a dissatisfaction with organised religion and was imported from abroad, being disseminated through the education system and the encounter with Western technology. Unbelief tended to arise in the minds of the educated and, increasingly, the semi-educated, because religious education had not kept pace with secular and academic education. Church leaders saw the universities and

other institutes of thirdlevel education as places that posed a danger to the faith of young *élites*.

This analysis of unbelief among the academic community is certainly not far from the truth. African universities are part of a secular tradition of higher learning that stems from the Enlightenment and from parent universities in Europe. Religious authority was seen as repressive and opposed to true academic freedom. Such freedom demanded an open mind, an agnosticism or methodological doubt. In matters of religious belief honesty was thought to consist in coming to no conclusion. This was conceived to be "rational" and "objective", since religion was deemed to be subjective and scientifically untrustworthy.

The first generation of African university students were taught to scoff at organised religion and at religious authority. In the history of human thought the "ages of faith" were ignored or dismissed, as being hopelessly flawed. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that African academics prided themselves on their unbelief, and that African undergraduates hastened to disprove the existence of God as soon as they arrived on campus.

The situation was aggravated by the Church's contestation with secular modernity. For a long time this was the principal agenda of Christian theology in the West. (Cf. Berger *op.cit.*, pp. 183189; Bertsch, *op.cit.*, pp. 103104). Then, as secularist unbelief showed no signs of weakening under the onslaught, but rather of exerting increasing pressure on the religious consciousness itself, the attempt was made to bargain with it and to strike a compromise. The attempt was made, through reductionism and accommodation, to make Christianity palatable to the secular consciousness. The end result of these theological gymnastics was to give academics the impression that Christian teachings were not worth fighting against. Theology was banished from the curriculum and the word became a synonym for irrelevance.

The Vatican colloquium of 1972 recommended a restructuring of the Catholic Church, to make it relevant to African life. Was this already an adumbration of the small Christian communities which came into prominence at the AMECEA study conference of the following year? It also called for the spiritual guidance of university students and those in other institutions of higher learning, through the creation of chaplaincies. Finally, it requested a competent adult catechesis of the *élites* that made greater use of Scripture (cf. *Gaba Colloquium*, *Op.cit.*, pp. 12).

At the time of the colloquium, there were already chaplaincies in most universities of English-speaking Africa. There were also departments of Religious Studies, at an early stage of development, in several of them. In some universities, however, as was the case with Dar-es-Salaam, the prejudice against theology was too strong to allow such a department to come into existence, and it was asked whether religious studies could add anything to what the departments of history, literature and social science were already doing. In general, however, the last quarter of a century has witnessed a stronger religious presence at universities and institutions of higher learning, and with it, a certain erosion of academic unbelief.

In accordance with the recommendations of the Vatican colloquium, efforts have been made to bring religious education at the universities up to the level of secular education. This is done, not only through conferences and instructions at the various chaplaincies, but also through graduate and undergraduate associations, such as the Newman Association, Pax Christi, Young Christian Students, the Student Christian Movement and Student Christian Unions. It is also done very effectively through the departments of Religious Studies, the specialised degree courses they offer and the religious options they provide in joint degree programmes. Finally, the Christian Churches and Islam have begun to sponsor their own faculties of theology and even their own private universities, where these are permitted by

the State.

Even if the concept of the national university is still secular, religious affiliation and religious opinion occupy a more prominent position on these campuses than they did two decades ago. Some people would argue that it is a much healthier situation for religion to strive openly for the allegiance of the *élites* in a secular environment, than to face little or no challenge on its own home ground. All things considered, the Churches are probably now in a stronger position than they were, with regard to secular unbelief in academic circles. However, the emphasis of secularism has now shifted from unbelief to a religious indifference caused by consumer materialism, as we shall show in the next section.

### **Secularism as Consumer Materialism**

Consumer materialism is the form of secularism most prevalent in the contemporary world, and the form which is rapidly appearing in Africa. It is the outcome of rapid technological change and is also strongly linked to wealth and the creation of wealth, since the affluent are the principal consumers. It is promoted by the electronic media, and it is associated with what has been called the global culture of "economism". This is another way of referring to the neoliberal, EuroAmerican technocracy. The indigenous cultures of the NonWestern world are powerless against the economic forces of Western capitalism. Economism has its roots in a Western culture that is intrinsically divisive and imperialist, based on the manipulation of technological power and inequality. It is a system which proclaims the overriding importance of the economic factor. It generates its own rituals and symbols and creates its own cultural myths of power, success, growth and prosperity. Economic issues prevail everywhere, especially in the media. Economic factors are assumed to be the main source of meaning and value, and virtue is defined by economic success, profitability, costeffectiveness and growth.

The popular scientific myth views economics as a science, an explanation that is strictly and objectively true, a science that can change the world. The fact remains that economics deals with human motives and behaviour which are far from predictable.

The rootsymbol of economism is the market, and the world is conceived as a series of interlinked markets. "Market" (like science itself) is a theory of ev-erything. Markets are characteristically held to be

"free" and just, if left to operate according to their own impersonal laws. The truth is that markets are never free or just. They do nothing by themselves, but are static, until manipulated by human beings. This neoliberal market ideology is, in fact, rooted in individualism or the logic of selfinterest, popularly equated with rationality itself. Success is calculated in terms of economic growth, not in the equitable sharing of wealth. While countries grow richer, their poorer citizens become more numerous.

Economism claims universal legitimacy as a world culture. In reality, however, it is a movement of "anticulture" which has no substance as a genuine cultural system at all. It results in cultural homogenisation and impoverishment. Paradoxically, the status of Christianity today as a world religion is largely due to the influence of Western economist culture. The Church has become the mirror and agent of economism and a vehicle of globalisation. Her missionaries unconsciously introduced secularism, by promoting a privatised, departmentalised religion, that does not effectively challenge the myths of economism (cf. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, S.P.C.K., London, 1995, pp. 262-263).

The late Fr Pedro Arrupe, S.J., told the 1977 Synod of Bishops in Rome, that the Church

must make "a fair and sober assessment of modern culture, however materialistic, irreligious and atheistic it may seem", otherwise the faith will continue to be separated from real life (Pedro Arrupe, "Catechesis and Inculturation", *AFER*, vol.20, no. 1, 1978, p. 32). The extreme reactions of restorationism and reductionism are fatal to religious belief. Christianity must not merely collaborate with modernity, but must surpass it or transcend it (cf. Berstch, *op.cit.*, pp. 106, 109). The new evangelisation has to bring about a social transformation, in which social responsibility and solidarity replace economic rationalism as the dominant motivation. This, in turn, depends on an internal transformation within Christianity itself.

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