

**THE TAINT OF SECULARISM ON CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA:
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SUCCESS OF CHRISTIAN EVANGELIZATION**

Luka Markus Barau

*Department of Christian Religious Studies
Kaduna State University, Kaduna- Nigeria
lukmarkb@gmail.com*

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.31621.83688

Astract

The 30 years of wars or reformation wars of religion were followed by secularization, a seemingly apparent solution to religious intolerance. However, despite the benefits of secularism, it became another challenge to Christianity and won the struggle but not without leaving its taint on Christianity. it was in this context that the missionaries made so much sacrifice and brought the Christian faith to this part of West Africa called Nigeria. As was the case in Europe, the negative impact of secularism persists in Nigeria to date among Christians thereby putting the integrity of the gospel into question. Using a desktop preview method, this paper analyses the negative dimensions of secular humanism, a side word for secularism. The paper further examines their implications on the success of evangelization otherwise known as Christian religious outreach. The Biblical perspective which is considered the central Christian authority is explored as a guide to true Christian humanism.

Keywords: Secularism, Christianity, Nigeria, Christian, Evangelization.

Introduction

To justify the actions of Martin Luther and other reformers in church history, historians and scholars often cite the ills of the medieval church. Particular reference is made to its clergy. In a nutshell, it is disparagingly called the dark ages. Admittedly, there were serious dark issues that necessitated the reformation. “By the end of the 15th century all groups in society except those in whose interest it was to maintain the running sore of Europe. The groups and their complaints were mainly the secularization and corruption of the church which had caused it to lose its *raison d’etre*, namely, the preaching of the gospel and the cure of souls and to become a sordid money, power-seeking institution. More than this, people chafed under the scandals arising from the benefits of clergy and the list was long” (Ferguson et al 1988:561). Therefore the reformation, unexpectedly

divided (Protestant and Catholics) as it turned out to be, must be appreciated. Its legacies have been most debatably “credited with increasing literacy rates, improving lives of women, birthing modern capitalism, advancing the scientific revolution and giving rise to protestant work ethics” (Hill 2017). Of course, the above is in addition to the reformed life of the clergy, the establishment of seminaries and theological institutions etc. However, did reformation remedy all the ills of the mediaeval church?

Unfortunately, as the saying goes ‘a solution to one problem brings us face to face with another’ the assertion of Christ that “a house divided against itself cannot stand” (Mk 3:25) applies. Among the sad unintended consequences of reformation were the European wars of religion or reformation wars which culminated in the 30 years war (1618-1648). It was largely a Christian internecine war. It exhausted Europe but thanks to the treaty of Westphalia (October 1648). The wars not only exhausted Europe but brought disenchantment with Christianity as the official state religion. And this eventually paved way for secularism and secularization of Western societies (Hitchcock 1982:34). It was from this circumstance that Christianity was packaged and brought to Africa.

From above it should be noted that secularism was not opted for as a lesser evil in the western world but as a solution to religious intolerance. In the language of Upreti, “only a secular state is capable of protecting people’s religious and cultural rights not a theocratic state with a declared state religion. From this perspective, it can be argued that secularism is fundamentally important in protecting and ensuring people’s religious and cultural rights which constitute the integral aspect of human rights” (Upreti 2021). This paper hereby acknowledges the positive dimension of secularism. However, the searchlight of the paper is focused on the negative impact on Nigerian Christianity and its implications on evangelization.

The early Christian missionaries must be applauded for their sacrifices and heroic effort to sow the Christian faith in Nigeria. Their effort has undoubtedly borne much fruit. However, does Nigerian Christianity not bear a trace or taint of secularism? What is secularism? What are its features on Nigerian Christianity? What are the likely effects can it have on the success or failures of evangelization or Christian outreach? And what stand does Christianity take on it? This paper will attempt to examine these questions.

Clarification of Key Terms

Key terms that require analysis in this paper are secular humanism, secularism and secularization, Evangelization and Christian outreach.

Secular Humanism, Secularism and Secularization

It is noted that in our contemporary world “Any research on secularism and secularization must begin with a definition of religion, immediately problems arise because of the absence of a generally accepted definition” (Haralambos et al 1980:473). By religion here, we are concerned with active and honest participation in institutional religion namely Christianity and the internalization of Christian values.

Clarification of the term secular humanism begins with the term humanist. Hitchcock identifies four quite distinct meanings of humanist (Hitchcock 1982:8). First a humanist in the restricted sense is someone interested, often professionally, in those intellectual and academic disciplines called the humanist which deals with both the non-rational and rational side of man. Traditionally they include literature, history, fine art, philosophy and sometimes theology. An example of this is Christian humanists like C.S. Lewis. The second meaning studies man as a dignified being whose deed can be noble and inspiring. The third meaning of humanist expresses a special loyalty to man as distinct from nature. Man’s uniqueness is a matter of concern here though acknowledged to come from God. The fourth meaning on the other hand goes to the extreme to not only acknowledge man’s uniqueness but set him apart from God. This is where the trouble begins as the usage justifiably attracts the adjective “secular”.

All alone “to call someone humanist is usually a term of honour. It is when the adjective “secular” is added that the trouble begins”. It comes from the Latin “*Saeculum*” which means ‘time’ or ‘age’ (as in the Latin prayer of the Catholic Church “*in secular saeculorum*” – literally “through all ages of age” commonly translated as “forever and ever”. To call someone secular “means that he is completely time bound, totally a child of his age, a creator of history with no vision of eternity, unable to see anything in the perspective of eternity, he cannot believe that God exists or act in human affairs. Moral standards, for example, tend to be merely those commonly accepted by the society in which he lives, and he believes that everything changes so that there are no enduring or permanent values” (Hitchcock 1982:11).

Thus the phrase “secular humanism” and secularism will be used interchangeably in this paper. The simple definition by Oxford advance learners dictionary is “the belief that religion should not be involved in the organization of society, education etc”. The secularist creed as revised and published in 1973 is outlined in the humanist manifestoes (AHA 1973:7-11) as follows;

... Traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human need or experience do a disservice to the human species.

.....We can discover no divine purpose or providence for the human species. While there is much that we do not know, humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.

..... we affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational, needing no theological or ideological sanction. In the area of sexuality, we believe that intolerant attitudes often cultivated by orthodox religions and puritanical cultures, unduly repress sexual conduct. The right to birth control, abortion and divorce should be recognized.

From the tone of the secularist creed above, they are vehemently intolerant of religion and as advocated by Paul Kurtz, editor of the humanist magazine, religion should be banished from the public domain. (cf Kurtz 1975:177).

Secularization is a process of actualizing a secularist dream, “the process of removing the influence or control that religion has over something” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary). It is popularly believed that the term “had its origin in the peace treaty of Westphalia (1648), designating the transfer of ecclesiastical property into princely hands, as the loss of the church temporal power is one of the most important dimensions of secularization” (Ferguson et al 1988:635).

However, worthy of notice is Jose Cassanova's (1994) analyses of dimensions of secularization. He identifies three aspects of secularization.

- i. Secularization as differentiation; this form of secularization occurs when a non-religious sphere of life (such as the state and the economy) splits and becomes independent of religion.
- ii. Secularization is the decline of religious beliefs and practices; in this case, secularization occurs when fewer individuals partake in religious activities. Kendal project (Heele et al 2000) concurs with this describing it as a decline in traditional theistic religion (based on a strong belief in God) evident by the falling numbers involved in the congregational domain.
- iii. Secularization as privatization: this aspect of secularization explains how religion stops playing any part in public life and does not even try to influence how politicians make decisions or individuals in society choose to live their lives. In this case, religion retreats to the privacy of individuals from the public domain.

Constitutionally, Nigeria is ambiguous on the secularity of the state. Okeke (2013) noted the contradiction; “the Nigerian 1999 constitution provided for religion and secularity and the same time in four sections. These are (1) section 10 which attempts to establish the

secularity of the Nigerian state by providing that the government of the federation or a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion (2) section 38 which re-enforces the right of Nigerians to freedom of thought, conscience in its 4 subsections (3) section 275 and 280 which make a Volt face and contradict the earlier quoted sections. Section 275 provides for the creation of state sharia courts of appeal while section 280 provides for the creation of states customary courts of appeal” (Okeke 2013). Therefore as Nigeria was never a Christian theocratic state and is constitutionally disfavored, the first dimension of secularization does apply here fully. Pam adds that “probably the most emotive and potentially explosive issue in Nigeria today is our constitutional religious imbalance” (Pam 2017)

The second aspect of secularization the decline of Christian religious beliefs and practices can hardly be applied to Nigeria. Pam (2017) noted that “the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes project scored Nigeria 92% (second only to Indonesia) in the importance of religion to people” Pam (2017). The third dimension of secularization too cannot be applied to the Nigeria Christian situation. However, we should bear in mind that the challenge in focus is syncretism (mixture) of Christian values with secular philosophies and its effect on the success of evangelization.

Evangelization/Christian Outreach

It is necessary to state that the terms ‘Evangelization’ and ‘Christian religious outreach’ are equivalent. While the former tends to be catholic in usage, the latter is Protestant. Godfrey (2014) sees both terms as “the effort that all baptized Christians are making to call Christians to keep to their faith and none Christian to conversion” (Godfrey 2014:138). Besides, Christian outreach, other side words include evangelism, proselytization, ministration, preaching etc.

This paper employs a working definition of McNeil (2006:357) that “evangelization can be properly viewed as the entire work of the church to “proclaim the reign of God” Mk 1:15). And that one can in summary fashion divide the responsibility of evangelization into three broad categories of ministries:

- i. Evangelism- Proclamation of the gospel to the ‘unchurched’ within our society or cultures.
- ii. Missionary activity- the cross-cultural proclamation of the gospel.
- iii. Pastoral activity- nourishing and deepening the gospel among those already committed to it.

Various approaches to evangelization by various Christian denominations include open-air preaching, trickle-down evangelism, door-to-door evangelism, Ashes to go evangelism

on Ash Wednesday, evangelizing through the sermon, lifestyle evangelism, friendship evangelism, creative evangelism, child evangelism, using gospel tract, televangelism, radio, internet, phone, personal evangelism, creation, Archeology, prophetic evangelism and use of props.

Features of Secularism in Nigerian Christianity

As earlier stated, the aspects of secularism to be focused on Christianity in Nigeria today are the few from within that tend to pose a challenge to the integrity of Christianity.

i. Religious pluralism and relativism- these ideologies are part of secularism that followed the reformation and consequences of splits in Christianity and the religious wars between denominations. A case in Europe applies as Nigeria tends to have more religious groups. “a pervasive sense of relativism leads members of European society at large to assure that religion is essentially a matter of taste, that there are many paths to heaven and that the concept of a true church is outmoded” (Durham 2022). This phenomenon of Christianity in Nigeria seems to be best captured by Berger as caused by secularism “Due to secularization, Berger states that religions have become almost institutionalised and marketed as a business would market a product. Religions become more flexible and less attached to their roots, as they try to attract people. This way, religion loses its essence and it stops becoming about the religion and starts becoming simply about attracting people to it” (Berger 1970). This religious pluralism caused by secularization explains the proliferation of churches or Christian denominations and floods of posters in our streets to attract ‘customers’. Of course, the economic dimension cannot be ignored.

ii. Church-state split and low political consciousness and emancipation- As earlier mentioned, the church-state split in European societies marked the beginning of secularization and this was already in place before the advent of Christianity in Nigeria. This has a negative impact on Christianity for “if the religion-society split gives rise to the feeling that Christianity has nothing to say beyond individual salvation and no distinctive world view affecting education, politics and business, then in this sense secularization is corrosive of Christianity” (Ferguson et al 1988:634). This secular impact left many Christians in Nigeria with low political consciousness and a dangerously complacent attitude to non-Christian domination at the federal and some state levels. However, the bitter experience of recent years is making a difference as observed by Abati, “with Muslim as Nigerian president for eight years and with the Nigerian Christian community convinced that a Muslim-led Nigerian presidency persecutes Christians and pampers Muslims, the church of Nigeria appears resolved to get into the arena of action” (Abati 2022).

iii. Rationalization to Religious Liberalism- rationalization became one of the key features of enlightenment which consequentially created liberals within the church leading to religious liberalism in Europe Ironically to a degree the churches themselves are primary vehicles by which secularism is spread...religious liberals applied the principle of freedom to matters of religion in roughly the same way it was applied to politics. To a certain extent, they favoured the democratization of the churches. More seriously, they applied it to belief itself. They became resistant or actively hostile to authority in religion; (Hitchcock 1982:117). In the name of civilization and modernity, this same attitude persists in the Nigerian church. Critics of the clergy or church authority are many and often employ shrewd means to discredit church authority. When their opinion fails to count they are confrontational or take to social media to smear the authority. This same emphasis on the principle of freedom became a catalyst, logically leading to revolutions and movements which expressed them in feminism, gay culture, sexual permissiveness and perversions, and death cultures such as suicide and abortion etc.

iv. Desacralization/ Desecration- the desacralization thesis simply put “means that supernatural forces are no longer seen as controlling the world, action is no longer directed by religious belief and human consciousness has become secularized” (Halarambos et al 2008:441). In the view of max weber, “the modern society is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and above all by the disenchantment of the world, the world is no longer charged with mystery and magic; the supernatural has been banished from the society” (Gerth et al 1948). While this notion of desacralization applies to 18th, 19th or 20th-century Europe, it cannot be directly applied to Africa even in the 21st century. The African worldview is still persistently very religious and in her worldview, the profane and the sacred cannot be separated” (Kanu 2015:96)

So then, how does desacralization feature in Nigerian Christianity? Perhaps a closely related word to apply should be desecration which is “the treatment of a holy thing or place without respect” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary). Both desecration and desacralization express fearlessness and disbelief in the significance of the supernatural. Desecrations in Nigerian Christianity include stage-managed miracles whose broadcasting was banned and effected 30th march 2004, the abuse of public oath-taking with the Bible, the use of comedians in the churches sanctuary to entertain church members or raise funds, use of the Bible or cross or Biblical citations cross by the comedians, nudity and immodest dressing especially by the females in places of worship etc.

v. Individualization and increased privacy- African society is known worldwide for the sense of blood ties, kinship or community living. But with the advent of colonization

and globalization rooted in secularism, individualization set in. While lamenting this challenge to evangelization, Durham (2022) noted how “individualization makes old door-to-door contacting systems much more difficult. At a deeper level, efforts to share religious beliefs are increasingly seen as an encroachment on privacy. But efforts to share religious belief are increasingly being viewed as aggressive, impolite and wrongfully intruding on privacy”

vi. *Individualization, Capitalist Mentality and Greed*- while we admit much to appreciate from secularism, one sad development it infects Christianity with is Greed. In Nigerian Christianity, it has reached a point of scandal for the majority of adherents who are relatively poor. Kanu (2015:240) associate it with capitalism and the disintegration of African kinship. “This (African kinship) is in clear contrast to this kind of spirit is the western capitalist mentality, which encourages unlimited personal accumulation, leading to aggression and violence and an attitude of consumerism that undermines solidarity and cooperation.”

In this regard, the lifestyle of Christian clerics and politicians in Nigeria is a living testimony to the taint of secularism. The private Jet pastor saga and the unprecedented luxurious life of other Christian clergies only remind us of the pre-reformation church. “It is believed by many that lavish and ostentatious lifestyle of higher clergy which alienated them from the suffering masses contributed to the initial success of Luther’s revolt and its earlier popularity with the disgruntled peasants”. (Ezewoko et al 2008:111)

Implications on the Success of Evangelization

The aforementioned features of secularism (and more) in Nigerian Christianity as it happened in Europe centuries ago have implications for evangelization in Nigeria. The first implication of secularization in the church is drawn from Christ’s assertion in Mark 3:25 that “a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand”. The phrase “cannot stand” can justifiably be taken to mean weakness or ineffectiveness. The 30 years of the reformation war (1618-1648) weakened Christendom and the church-state split further loosen the church’s grip on society. On arrival in Nigeria, the church-state split mentality left Christians with a complacent attitude politically and relatively ineffective.

The Christian pluralism of denominations and relativism of religious truth has serious implications in the mind of both non-Christians and lukewarm Christians. Scepticism is the inevitable implication as voiced out by Michel de Montaigne: “if a variety of religious groups each claim to have the truth, and each claims that all the others are in error, does it not seem reasonable that all of them are in error?” (Hitchcock 1982:33). It was this scepticism that led many to publicly profess atheism after abandoning Christianity. It is

likely too that Muslims in Nigeria can resist evangelization on this same ground. Concerning rationalism and religious liberalism, their effects are ambivalent. While it must be emphasized that not all religious truth will be appreciated by the rationalist, it in some way helps to provide a better understanding of Christian truth if well defended by apologists and the church authority to be more credible. But liberalism makes Christianity lose its essence and makes a compromise. In this way, its beauty is lost from the sight of potential converts and a weak member eventually falls out. Most seriously, Christianity is identified with westernization and immorality (or said to approve of it).

Desecration in its different dimensions as explained above has also succeeded in creating doubts of credibility in Christianity. For example “I share in the scepticism that suspects some charismatic ministers who broadcast such events without adequately checking the genuineness of the miracles to aggrandize their ministries and gain followers” (Armstrong 2004). The stage-managed miracles concerned here and another form of desecration highlighted above maliciously discredit Christianity, portraying it as a scam to the outside world.

The capitalist mentality and the greed it breeds which is best expressed in the life of the Christian elites have done so much disservice to the image of Christianity too. How can a potential convert to Christianity or a lukewarm Christian see the person of Christ in a greedy and worldly Christian cleric? In this way the success of evangelization is frustrated.

The Christian Stand on Secularism

To begin with, it should be noted that “Christians are by definition humanist. They cannot acquiesce in a philosophy which denies the goodness of God’s creation by degrading humanity. There is a God-given natural dignity to man which even the best of the pagans have recognized and which Christians must affirm” (Hitchcock 1982:9)

Amid a continually multiplying number of Christian groups, we can only resort to a central authority, the Holy Bible to provide clues of the Christian stand on secularism. However, we cannot exhaustively cite Biblical texts on secularism. The words word and worldly seem to be used in place of secular.

God created man in his image and gave him dominion over the earth (cf Gen 1:26). He made him little less than God and crowns him with honour and glory. Yet God commanded him “I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 2-3).

Christian supporters of separation of church and state also cite the following texts as foreshadowing it; “my kingdom is not of this world, if my kingdom were of this world my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews (cf Jn 18:36). “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mtt 22:21)

In Pauline Epistles, he admonished Christians to pay absolute obedience to civil authority and pray for their rulers (1 Tim 2:1-2, Titus 3:1, Pet 2:13-17 and Rom 13). However, Paul acknowledges the extreme godlessness and moral perversion of secularism (cf Rom 1:18-32) and then warned “do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (cf Rom 12:2)

Conclusion

The initial struggle of Christianity with secularism was gloomy as it was made more complicated with scientific growth. However, even the most Orthodox and fanatical Christian must admit that secularism has some benefits even to Christian evangelization. Education and medicine for example which were useful instruments for Christian missionaries were advanced by secularism. However, the infiltration of secularism ideology continues to pose challenges not only to Christian evangelization in Nigeria but to our African identity. The history of Christianity is a history of challenges like persecutions and heresies from which some good came out. Secularism must be seen as such a formidable threat attacking from within. And newer and more effective modern ways must be developed with optimism to come with the modern challenge knowing that as far as Christ is with his church “the power of death shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18).

Recommendations

Considering the force of globalization in the 20th and 21st centuries, one can say that secularization is a global phenomenon. However, Christianity is a special victim as it emerged from the same root as colonization and the negative secularization of the west which completely severed religion from state affairs. This is the more reason Christians need to correct this mistaken identification. From the analysis so far, I hereby make the following Recommendations:

To the Christian clerics, I recommend active participation in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue to help create a better understanding of Christian values of secularization.

To Christian parents and guardians, I recommend keeping watchful eyes on your children concerning the use of television and social media. Exercise your God-given right to their dressing, choice of friends and peer group and participation in Christian religious activities. But with your lifestyle, you can do much more.

To the generality of the Christian faithful, I recommend constructive engagement in the dialogue of life with non-Christians and fellow Christians alike. This may include live interactions through sports, studies, invitations and visitation at major feasts like Christmas or Easter, Sallah or weddings. Also planning and execution of common projects like clearing of drainage, construction of Community Bridge etc are other fora to create a better understanding of selves.

The pulpit is particularly an important instrument for Christian clerics to teach Christian values and deemphasize secular values. But above all with their personal and Ecclesiastical resources at their disposal, I recommend they renounce greed and selfishness, and teach and preach by touching the lives of the needy. Also as Christian elders, I recommend their children and spouses not to bear the taint of secularization to attract reproach (cf Titus 1:6)

References

- AHA (1973) *Humanist Manifestoes I and II*. Buffalo, N.Y: Prometheus Books
- Armstrong C (2004). Do Nigerian miracle ministries discredit the faith"? Retrieved 30th October.
- Abati R. (2022) "Politics and the Church in Nigeria" in *premium times* 15th march 2022.
- Berger P. (1970) *A Rumor of Angels: modern society and the rediscovery of the supernatural*. London: Allen Lane.
- Cassanova J. (1994) *Public religion in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ezewoko I. & Agwuocha C (2008). "The Catholic Priesthood and the problem of 'Being' and 'Having'". In: *NACATHS, Journal of African Theology*. Vol 18 ISSN-1463.
- Ferguson, S.B, Wright D.F & Packer J.I (1988) "entry on secularization" *New Dictionary of Theology*.
- Gerth, H.H & Mills C.W (eds)(1948) from *Max Weber Essays in Sociology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Godfrey, E.A (2014) "Christian religious outreach or evangelization: the means to Transformation in Nigeria" in *Journal of Christian Religious Studies*. Vol 2. No 2. IS2276
- Hil, I M. (2017). "The Reformation: Its History and Legacy". Retrieved 12 October 2022.
- Hitchcock J. (1982) *What is Secular Humanism? Why Humanism became Secular and how it is changing our world*. Michigan: servant books.
- Haralambos M, Holborn M. & Heald R (2008) *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*. London: Harper Collins publishers.
- Kanu, I.A (2015). *A Hermeneutic Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*. Jos. Augustinian Publications Nigerian.

Luka Markus Barau

- Kurtz, P. ed,(1975). *The Humanist Alternative*. Buffalo N.Y; Prometheus books
- Mcneil L. (2006). The Entry “Evangelization” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*. Bangalore: Theological publications in India.
- Pam, J. (2017) “a review of the secularity of the Nigerian 1999 constitution” retrieved 30th October 2022.
- Upreti G. (2021). Why Nepal should be a secular state? Retrieved 28th October 2022.