

## **RELIGION AND SECULARIZATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE**

***Victor Ifeanyi Ede Ph.D***

*School of General Studies,  
Michael Okpara University of Agriculture,  
Umudike, Abia State Nigeria  
victorifede@gmail.com; ede.victor@mouau.edu.ng;*

***Dominic Zuoke Kalu PhD***

*School of General Studies,  
Michael Okpara University of Agriculture,  
Umudike, Abia State Nigeria  
domziki@gmail.com, kalu.dominic@mouau.edu.ng*

### **Executive Summary**

*As humans, we acknowledge that our senses are not adequate for expressing our innermost feelings and aspirations. This is because; there is a dimension of human identity that cannot be expressed empirically. That is the essence of religiosity, spirituality or sacredness. There was a time when religiosity took centre stage in the cultures of Europe and North America. Later, a new deity called Reason, with its sister called Technology entered the cultural stage. The whirlwinds of technology and progress without ado swept aside religiosity, and secularity became the norm. However, the story is not the same in Africa as Africans have continued to hold religiosity tenaciously despite the influence of science and technology. Africa is the Theatre in which the Drama of competing religions is played. Africans are both the Actors and the Audience in their own Drama, cheered by onlookers and bystanders who from time to time toss tokens of appreciation or disdain. In the meantime, Africans wear the garbs of Europe and North America, speak their languages, and play their music while dancing their dances. But African religiosity has remained intact. The Third Millennium has begun with Africans taking religion seriously, while elsewhere technology and progress took centre stage. This paper analyzes the possibility of Africa becoming secular societies or maintaining the current religious tempo in the nearest future.*

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## **Introduction**

Religion for centuries has been a very important aspect in uniting people across different cultures. This is because of the common beliefs that people in a given culture hold. It has also been very instrumental in enhancing the buildup and retention of morals in the society. In the course of evolution especially during industrialization as well as civilization of many nations in the world, religion has experienced many challenges that have led to changes in many religious aspects. As a result, religion holds different forms and different meanings from one generation to the other. Mueller (2013) noted that the enlightenment era, which gave birth to industrialized *cum* secularized societies, initiated ideas which attacked religion and its exalted position in the affairs of society. This led to the supposed dethronement of religion and subsequent secularization of societies. Hence, modern liberal democracies emerged and introduced the principle of separation of state and religion, in which religion was thought to have exhausted its usefulness and could be conveniently relegated into antiquity (Mueller 2013; Wallace 2013). However, the story is not the same in Africa as Africans have continued to hold religiosity tenaciously despite the influence of science and technology. Africa is the Theatre in which the Drama of competing religions is played. Africans are both the Actors and the Audience in their own Drama, cheered by onlookers and bystanders who from time to time toss tokens of appreciation or disdain. In the meantime, Africans wear the garbs of Europe and North America, speak their languages, and play their music while dancing their dances. But African religiosity has remained intact. The Third Millennium has begun with Africans taking religion seriously, while elsewhere technology and progress took centre stage. This paper analyzes the possibility of Africa becoming secular societies or maintaining the current religious tempo in the nearest future.

## **Conceptualizing Religion and Secularization**

### *Religion*

Religion, which is a matter of belief and practice, is a universal social phenomenon which seriously concerns almost every living man. The term has been defined differently by scholars depending on their orientation and perception. Hence Religion has no generally accepted definition. However, religion is generally understood by many as a belief in the Supernatural power or the Supreme Being and their relationship with the nature that surrounds them. Hick (1994) defined religion as the human recognition of super human controlling power and especially of a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship. According to Agha (2012), “religion is the conscious or unconscious belief in spiritual being and elements (forces of nature) with powers” (p. 21). Also, religion according to Bouquet (1941) is a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent,

the absolute or simply God. One of the most popular definitions of religion is that of Durkheim (1915). He defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community and all those who adhere to them. All these definitions point to the issue of beliefs. Religion can therefore be defined as belief, recognition and worship of the existence of a deity or deities and divine involvement in the universe and human life.

### *Secularization*

The term ‘secularization’ denotes a process by which (gradually or rapidly, unintendedly or intentionally) the ‘religious’ gives way to the ‘secular’. Secularization occurs when religious values and beliefs are recouped with non-religious values and beliefs. Nweke (2021) sees secularization as the transformation of a society from close religious value identification towards non-religious values and secular organizations. This implies that as societies progress, particularly through modernization and rationalization, religion loses its authority in all aspects of social life and governance.

### **Importance of Religion in the Society**

Religion is a fundamental part of human dignity. For many adherents, it is far more than a mere lifestyle choice; it is the deepest part of who they are. To violate a person’s religious freedom or require them to act against their religious beliefs or practices violates the very core of that person’s being (Taylor, 1995). Sociological studies have shown positive benefits of religious affiliation for school performance, positive family life, well-being and contribution to community life (Schludermann, et al, 2000; Clark, 1998; Perry, 1998; and Baetz et al, 2006). Religions also provide for rites of passage such as marking birth, marriage and death.

Religions generally promote ethical, law-abiding behaviour in their adherents. Religious adherents strive to obey the law and respect the authority of the state. Religion thereby fosters “moral self-government” according to Sullivan (1994). Kelsay and Twiss (1994) argue that “Cooperation, sharing, and altruism can all be related to the sense of identity that religious traditions provide.” Religious institutions are the source of humanitarian work in so many countries. Religious adherents provide much of the funding as well as volunteer labour for providing humanitarian assistance. Therefore, if religious adherence is valued and accommodated, the benefits that accrue to society are well-behaved citizens that contribute to the well-being of society. But if religious adherence is denigrated or shut out from public life, society will not only lose the benefits derived from religious adherents but also likely face a backlash from religious adherents.

## **Religion in African Life**

Some scholars, Marx (1844); Durkheim (1915); Freud (1927), earlier predicted that religion would die out as societies modernize. However, this has not happened as can be seen in the impact of religion in lives of majority of world population in recent time. According to Bentzen (2020), “today, 83% of the world population believe in God and the role of religion is strengthening in some societies” (p. 1). Similarly, Barrett and Johnson (2001) cited by Koenig (2009) stated that “despite spectacular advances in technology and science, 90% of the world’s population is involved today in some form of religious or spiritual practice” (p. 283). This shows that religion has been serving a purpose that modernization does not fulfil. Hence, Sulkowski and Ignatowski (2020) noted that despite progressing secularization, religion, churches, and denominational associations have an impact on individual ethical choices and business decisions.

In Africa, religion constitutes an inextricable part of the society. Religion constitutes the main fabric of African societies, and is intertwined with their general existence, including their socio-political and economic development. Hence, Mbiti (1999) asserted that Africans are notoriously religious and religion permeates all departments of life to such an extent that it is not easy or possible to isolate it. According to Koenig (2009), in many African countries people who do not subscribe to any form of religion make up less than 0.1% of the population. Although the African religious consciousness was initially derived from the practice of traditional religion, Christianity and Islam have given further impetus to this consciousness. In Africa, practically all human activities and conditions including health and diseases are seen and experienced from a religious perspective. It is therefore common for Africans to resort to religion in their moments of despair, disaster, fear and uncertainty.

## **Analysis**

Today, many people are gradually drifting from religion. The establishment of scientific views to explain natural phenomenon has greatly propagated this change in the society. Many nations are investing heavily on technological inventions. Since the inventions are so great to many people, their attention on religion has declined significantly. This has transformed most scientists to social icons on the basis that they are able to bring into existence completely new things. With the current increase in scientific as well as technological inventions, many people are drifting into secularism. They advocate for people to be neutral in dealing with matters within the society. Secularism aims to separate the government from religious beliefs, practices and religious judgment...”it holds that the basis of human decisions and activities is evidence and facts but not on religious views” (Noah, 2005, p.14). Owing to this, several bodies has conducted surveys to establish the magnitude to which science has influenced religious beliefs. For instance, in 2009, the Pew Research Centre in America

showed that “only 33% of scientists believed in God... 17% of the public did not believe that a supernatural being, God exists and 7% believed in a personal God” (Panda, 2019). The whirlwinds of technology and progress without ado swept aside religiosity, and secularity became the norm. However, the story is not the same in Africa as Africans have continued to hold religiosity tenaciously despite the influence of science and technology. Africa is the Theatre in which the Drama of competing religions is played. Africans are both the Actors and the Audience in their own Drama, cheered by onlookers and bystanders who from time to time toss tokens of appreciation or disdain. In the meantime, Africans wear the garbs of Europe and North America, speak their languages, and play their music while dancing their dances. But African religiosity has remained intact. The Third Millennium has begun with Africans taking religion seriously, while elsewhere technology and progress took centre stage. The question begging for answer is whether Africa will be able to maintain the current religious tempo in the nearest future. Current happenings in Sub-Saharan Africa have shown that not only will there be many more African Traditionalists, Christians and Muslims, but they are also likely to be active and devoted in their religious practices and strongly resistant to secularization. African religiosity emerges strongly in most surveys, even if it is not quite uniform. Nowhere are there significant minorities rejecting or questioning the religious consensus, especially such fundamental assumptions as the belief in God. In modern times, by far the most important trend in African Christianity has been toward especially enthusiastic, charismatic, and Pentecostal expressions of faith. Many of the newer churches use highly entrepreneurial forms of marketing and evangelism to spread that faith, commonly employing the most advanced technology. Similarly, in many African societies, youths have vigorously reintroduced traditional religious practices earlier abandoned as a result of modernization.

## **Conclusion**

Religion is the single most important aspect in bringing people together. This is due to the system of norms and values as well as practices within each religion. Before the inception of the modern world and the modern liberal state, religion and religious actors were at the helm of affairs in the running of society; religion and state were effectively mixed. But the Enlightenment era, which gave birth to industrialized *cum* secularized societies, initiated ideas which attacked religion and its exalted position in the affairs of society. However, amidst all the changes, there is always a remnant in each religion that truly holds to the initial aspects and meaning of their religion. Despite the dynamism of the world, religion will remain an important social aspect. The future of religion is uncertain; however, the possibility of Africa maintaining the current religious tempo in the nearest future almost a reality in the light of the high rates of African spirituality.

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