
THE THREAT OF SECULARISATION ON RELIGION BY

**TORKWEMBE, CATHERINE MWANGER (PhD)
Department of Religion and Philosophy,
Faculty of Arts,
University of Jos.**

INTRODUCTION

No cultural force is of greater importance for the understanding of modernization than the process of secularization. This holds true not only of western civilization but increasingly the rest of the world as well. As all such movements of this magnitude, secularization is the outcome of the confluence of a huge variety of factors, for example there has been immense advancement in science and technology, which is evident particularly in the area of mass communication, medicine, industrialization and urbanization, etc. These have brought about unprecedented developments and improvements in the lives of the people on the globe. Recent inventions and discoveries in the field of medicine have however gone a long way to enhancing human health as well as creating a more conducive environment to better human living. The effect of mass media and other ways or means of communication are also tremendous. These have created greater awareness among peoples and nations of the world. The world is almost becoming a global village where everyone knows what is going on around him or her. This in turn has brought about a growing spirit of unity and collaboration among the various members of the whole community. In fact, the whole humanity is experiencing immense pleasure and satisfaction as it enjoys the material benefit of the new scientific and technological discoveries. Life today, especially in towns and cities, is therefore marked by what we can refer to as “secularist” approach to life, thus, the glory of the secular age has come into being.

On the other hand, its implications for man are multifaceted, thus, this great advancement is posing very serious challenges to humanity in general and to religion in particular. As a result, mankind is facing grave danger of self-destruction with the threatening growth in armament which can easily cause a total annihilation of the whole world; so also efforts are being made by several nations of the world to legalize abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, etc. These are life-threatening perils being caused by secularism. This refers to a system of belief or an attitude which connotes the existence or the significance of realities other than those which can be measured by scientific methods. So religious institutions are consciously or unconsciously undergoing what is referred to as secularization. Secularization is a process by which religion loses its influence on a society's beliefs, norms and values.

In this write-up, we shall attempt to distinguish between secularism and secularization; its threat and tendency on religion, the role and place of religion in modern world and finally a conclusion will be drawn.

SECULARISM AND SECULARIZATION DISTINGUISHED

Both secularism and secularization are concepts that exact the capacity of man in his lifestyle on earth. There is however a great distinction between them; while secularism is an

ideology, secularization is a process. It is the abuse and overemphasis (final extreme) on secularization that leads to secularism.

SECULARISM DEFINED

The term secularism comes from a Latin word “seculum” which means “time”. According to the secular thinking, only the problem of man's time on earth are important and not the problems which concern God and eternity. Secularism is therefore a way of thinking and acting which face men and women as they live their natural lives on earth. Secularism thus treats religious questions as irrelevant (Brown 224-225).

Secularism therefore refers to a system of belief or an attitude which in principle denies the existence or significance of realities other than those which can be measured by scientific methods of the natural sciences. Secularism thus is a form of humanism that limits true value of these temporal qualities that contribute to man's natural and social life to the exclusion of the supernatural.

It was defined at the Jerusalem meeting of the International Missionary Council (1928) as: “a way of life and an interpretation of life that do not find God, or a realm of spiritual reality, necessary for life or thought (International Missionary Council 284). The Episcopal Conference of USA furthermore, described it in 1947 as: “a view of life that limits itself not to the material in exclusive of the spiritual, but to the human here and now, to God here and hereafter” (New Catholic Encyclopedia 36).

Secularism as a distinctive philosophy developed in the mid 19th century by George Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh of England. This was their postulate principle of natural morality independent of all revelation and supernatural orientations; absolute freedom of opinion on all matters, including morality, natural improvement in his life; absolute separation of church and state (36). Secularism is therefore any ideology which advocates the abolition of religion and the transfer of the ancillary social functions of religion to secular agencies (Clarke and Andrew 747). As an ideology therefore, secularism tends to delve into all those areas that make up the society. It calls for the advancement of whatever pertains to man: his work, his science and art, his recreation and leisure, in short, in all man's earthly existence. It summons man to greater knowledge and acknowledgement of earthly realities of their laws and rightful claims. It wants man to be taken seriously; man and his world, its history, its goals and its hopes and expectations perfectly reasonable especially in the light of what the 20th and 21st century man has already achieved. Henceforth, there are virtually no limits to what man can bring about however incredible or fantastic it may have seemed in the past.

SECULARISATION DEFINED

The general definition of the term “secular” the root word for secularization belongs to the world and its affairs as distinguished from the church and religion: civil, law, temporal. Chiefly used as a negative term, the meaning is non-ecclesiastical, non-religious or non-sacred (Oxford Dictionary 848). It also means “to dissociate or separate from religion or spiritual concerns” (850). It not in this negative sense in which secularization, meaning anti-religion, and anti-spiritual or anti-sacred is used in this write-up.

Secularisation as a term should not be understood from a myopic narrow and negative stand point as a term negating religion but rather as one that gives religion its pride of place while other areas of human endeavour are allowed to thrive. We can thus functionally define

secularization as “drawing a line between what is holy or sacred and what is secular or profane and allowing the two to thrive side by side. Secularization is therefore that process in our civilization by which human existence comes to be determined by the dimension of time and history. What this means is that modern man has become so secular to the extent that he ceases to have interest in anything that does not enter into the determination of his life as a creature and creator of history in this world here and now. This means obviously a decreasing concern with other worldly goals and problems. For that reason, metaphysical systems and theological doctrines cease to matter in direct proportion to the degree to which they do not come to bear in some more or less direct way upon man's life in the profane order. Religion in so far as it points man towards ultimate concerns which tend to be pushed to the periphery so that attention can be concentrated on matters of more immediate concern (Cauthen 32). This is to say that for secularization, life does not depend upon gods or myths or metaphysics but upon personal decision and responsible control and exercise of power (Callahan 8). By this is meant that human history in time and space of this world is the locus of meaning that human history in time and space of this world is the locus of meaning in a process in which man himself is the sole subject and agent so, both science and secularization lead to the conclusion that man has only himself to count on. He is his own lord as he seeks to make his existence what he can (Cauthen 13). In short, modern man has traveled two roads; sometimes running parallel but frequently intersecting, both of which leads towards the death of God (Richardson 61).

One road has been marked by a revolution in the understanding of nature while the other has followed the path cleared by new ways of understanding history. Nature as a purposeless process and history as the reality of human autonomy – here and dominant elements in the worldview (*weltanschauung*) generated by the combined impact of science and secularization in the modern world.

Secularization can thus be said to be the transformation of institutions, ideas and experience that were once the work of divine prominence into the product of purely human thought and action. The process of secularization thus alienates man from the sacred more and more and he now leans heavily on the secular outlook for the appreciation, understanding, assessment and approval of his own understanding of himself, his fellow creatures and the world about him. A secular age, then, is one whose basic interest is with the concrete practical issues of life without any obvious or strong felt need to refer to any supernatural, other worldly or ultimate realities.

The process of secularization therefore meant, in fact, that the churches' religion and theology suffered a functional loss. A new independent world has come into being alongside the church. The confidence and trust that men once places in the church are being transferred because of this functional loss to the vast majority of other activities and institutions realized within a sphere of understanding. The traditional way of speaking of God and to God has become gradually more difficult, thus, a greater number of people find appeals to a transcendent purposive God neither credible nor relevant. This is the situation that lies behind the widespread recognition that the Christian God and the meaningful language about him have become the central issues in contemporary philosophy of religion. In addition, science and secularization today raise the deepest questions concerning the truth and relevance of religion, hence, modern man is confronted with certain ambiguities in thinking about faith and his practice of religion and according to Schillebeeks, Religion has become “suspect” (Schillebeeks 61).

From the above discussion, we have seen that 'secularism' is a closed system of belief while 'secularization' is a historical process. This process may be looked at both in its negative and positive aspects. Negatively it is the withdrawal of life and activity from the control of organised religious bodies and the withdrawal of areas of thought from the control of what are believed to be revealed religious truths. Positively, it may be seen as the increasing assertion of the competence of human science and techniques to handle human problems of every kind (Newbiggin 12).

SECULARIZATION: TENDENCY AND THREAT TO RELIGION

The term secularization was first in use in a sense approximating its contemporary usage at the writing of the treaty of Westphalia following the Thirty-Year-War in the late middle ages and the early renaissance, when considerable church property was sequestered and placed under the control of the secular authorities; its connotations at the time were neutral and no more anti-Christian than the term "secular clergy" (Clarke and Andrew 747). In Roman Canon law, it denotes the return of a cleric to lay state. In those two instances, the term was purely descriptive and non-evaluative. In today's usage however, the term in all its derivatives is used as an ideological concept and is highly charged with evaluative connotations. Sometimes, it has come to stand for the liberation of modern man from religious tutelage and sometimes it has been attacked as de-Christianization or Paganization (Clarke and Andrew 747).

Generally, secularization has come to apply to any aspect of life that has been withdrawn from the control of the church or interpreted apart from the Christian worldview, thus, we return the sense of the world when referring to the capitalist spirit as a secularization for the puritan ethos or Marxism as a secularized Judeo-Christian eschatology (Callahan 8). The essential element here is the transformation of institutions, ideas and experience that were once the work of divine providence into the product of purely human thought and action. Secularization thus calls for the separation of organized religion and the state according to which more and more decisions affecting the lives of people become politically organized; religion now has less and less influence on them. This, it is hoped will give man the freedom to use his direction more of the progress of mankind.

The most significant fact about the time in which we are living is therefore that it is a time in which a single movement of secularization is bringing the people of all continents into its sweep (Newbiggin 11). For that reason, science and technology planning are playing a more and more important part in the building of the world and the promotion of the well-being of all peoples and in this process, man's earlier pre-scientific and pre-industrial attitude towards the world is radically changing. Our world (age) is changing and this change is as a result of advanced human thinking, which has affected every aspect of human existence. This change has taken its toll on religious beliefs and practices. Our age is full of people who have lost their

'sense of mystery'. This is because God, who forms the basis of mystery, is neglected or completely disregarded. There is a playing down on the role of God to give meaning to human existence. The search for truth in God has been thrown overboard as man has made himself the point of reference (Moziā 1).

Once more, the tempo of technological change since the Second World War has been breathtaking. By its achievements, science and technology have come to dominate the world and also to dictate how life should be lived on earth while arts and humanities appear to be straining to retain what is left of its relevance. As a result, many people in our society today are almost exclusively interested in acquisition of technical knowledge and skills and have little or no concern for humanistic studies and spiritual values. They are more interested in means than the purpose it should serve; pre-occupying themselves with science and technology to master and exploit nature for human ends rather than wonder at its mystery and order, and this impersonal attitude has often been extended to man's relations with other persons. A primary concern for technology has moreover fostered the idea that all problems which confront man can be solved by the application of the right method (scientific method), which is the only dependable method of attaining truth in every field of learning and that all other methods produce mere opinions which cannot be verified by others, hence are worthless. In contrast with the fact that the solution of technical problems gives man a sense of power over his natural environment and tends to enhance his pride in his achievements, his confrontation of the mystery of love for God can awaken feelings of awe in him and make him aware of his dependence on forces beyond his control. If however, he denies the reality of the mystery because he cannot fully comprehend it or bend it to his purposes, if he narrows his vision to the finite things he can understand and master, he loses his ability to believe in an infinite spiritual reality which transcends the world of nature (Thomas IX-X).

Once more, August Comte's view that religions belong to the primitive phase in the process of development of human mind implies that religion is now outdated, for according to him, we are now in the positive age, that is the age of positive science. The mind of the modern man (the man in the age of science) is no longer preoccupied with religious questions or religious expectations of the world, thus, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the "father" of secularization theology, claims that mankind has come of age and can now get along without God. Mankind has outgrown the age of religion, the age that needed God and used God as a hypothesis to get on with life. God Himself now wants mankind to fend for himself and live as if He did not exist. "God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along well without Him" (Bonhoeffer 163).

The dominance of scientific method, the preoccupation with technology and the enhancement of man's power by the application of both were major causes of the growth of religious skepticism in the nineteenth century. Their influence along with other causes has culminated in the twentieth century in a frank and often militant atheism that has entered into the twenty-first century. This is so because many people today feel that religion does not help them to answer the most important questions of life. To them, the most important questions of life are not those of God but those questions that have to do with politics and society, the physical needs of men and women. These questions include concerns of people all over the world: poverty, deprivation, bribery and corruption, armed robbery, armed banditry, human trafficking, kidnapping, secret cult, prostitution, drug abuse, assassination or murders of different kinds, terrorism, craze for entertainment and an onslaught of materialism, environmental degradation and its threat to man's continuous existence, development of atomic, chemical and bacteriological weapons, hunger and underdevelopment, etc.

All the above seem to imply that a religious attitude in the modern age (the age of science and technology) is outdated and unreasonable, but it is of paramount importance to note that, the removal of the fear of God in people and the elevation of man's superiority will bring about a sweeping away of moral values, the breakdown of law and order in society, lack of respect of human life and a complete annihilation for cultural values as we are already experiencing in Nigeria in particular and Africa as a whole. In effect therefore, the dawn of both secularism and secularization point to a spiritual decadence in the society.

THE ROLE AND PLACE OF RELIGION IN SOCIETY

Religion is much too great and permanent an element in human experience to be swept out of sight. World history would be incomplete without reference to religion, nor can the history of any nation be written without reference to it. Religion is as old as man on earth and will in all probability remain on earth for as long as man remains on it. In spite of the fact that religion has been the source of so much evil in the world: intolerance, fanaticism, bigotry, discrimination, hostility, mutual condemnation, 'holy wars', persecution, etc, it has also aided social progress, educational development, interpersonal and international cooperation as well as mutual understanding among people. Religion is therefore a two-edged sword which can cut either way with serious consequences. It is a powerful and very delicate phenomenon which needs to be handled with utmost caution.

It is however important to note that change in society is inevitable as long as man lives and grows every day. When religion therefore refuses to participate in the process of change on the ground that some of its principles are unchanging or cannot be changed, then the rise of secularism is encouraged. All believers in the society today are therefore challenged to show that religion is an essential feature of human existence and not a mere phase in the process of human evolution. This is so because while science and technology play an important role in the development and enhancement of the society, it does not however possess all the answers to human existence, for example, the questions as to why man is in this world, the question as to whether human life is meaningful or meaningless or rather, what is the purpose of human life, whether or not there is a spiritual and immortal element in man as part of his being. Other questions are: Does human life continue in another form after death? Is there a spiritual world distinct from the physical world we know? Does the universe owe its existence to any being outside and distinct from it? How ought we to behave to one another in this world? etc. By providing man with a worldview and describing man's place within the scheme of things, religion enables many people (who believe in it) to see human life as meaningful and purposeful, thus providing them with a sense of direction of life. For instance, many frustrated people have found meaning and consolation when they turn to religion. There would have been many case of suicide if religion were not to provide consolation, meaning and courage to frustrated people who have come to see their lives as meaningless and not worth living (Omoregbe 123).

Apart from providing many people with meaning and sense of purpose in life, religion also fulfils other important functions in society, namely:

Religion provides mental peace: Hyman life is uncertain. He struggles for his survival amidst the uncertainties, insecurities and dangers. Sometimes he feels helplessness. It is the religion which consoles and encourages him in all such time of crisis. Religion gives right

shelter to him. He gets mental peace and emotional support. It encourages him to face his life and problems.

It inculcates social virtues: Religion promotes the major social virtues like truth, honesty, non-violence, service, love, discipline etc. A follower of the religions internalizes these virtues and becomes disciplined citizen of the society.

Religion promotes social solidarity: Religion gives rise to the spirit of brotherhood. Emile Durkheim viewed that religion strengthens social solidarity. As a result, religion has the supremely integration and verifying force in human society. It is true that common belief, common sentiment, common worship, participation in common rituals etc are the significant cementing factors which strengthen unity and solidarity (31-33).

Religion converts the animal qualities to human qualities: Religion inculcates the spirit of self-service. It demands that people should be charitable and benevolent. Through various religious experiences he forgets the worldly life and problems. This experience suppresses the animal desires and converts the animal qualities of man to human qualities.

Religion is an agent of socialization and social control: Religion has significant role in organizing and directing social life. It helps in preserving social norms and strengthening social control. As an informal means, religion regulates the activities of people in its own way. Organizations like temples, mosques, church, Gurudwaras etc also control the behaviour of the individuals at different levels.

Religion promotes welfare: Religion teaches the people to serve the masses and promote their welfare. It gives message that “the service to humanity is service to God”. For this reason, people spend money to feed poor and needy. Great religions like Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity etc put emphasis on alms-giving to the poor and beggars. With the influence of religious belief, different religious organizations engage themselves in various welfare activities.

Religion gives recreation: Religious rites and festivals are more or less performed in every religion which gives relief to the people from mental exertion.

Religion influences political system: Religion has played a significant role in political system in the ancient and medieval society. During ancient and medieval period, the monarchs were treating themselves as the representatives of the God or ruling the society in the name of God. Even today, political leaders take oath in the name of God.

Every religion has its own ethics. Thus, religion can be seen as a means of communication that is both on a social and spiritual plain. i.e. in two directions. Religion should therefore go beyond science and take man as man; guiding him towards perfect happiness in the here-and-now and here-after. This is so because religion will always express and find its context in concrete human life and will always form a community that is incarnate in the world. In the past, religion functioned in a stable and unsophisticated world. Man's religious experience today however has to assimilate something entirely new – man's industrial world, where science and technology are planning hope to create a future for mankind. For our society, once this is done without the appeal to God, secularism would step in and since our ideas of God are culturally conditional, we need to keep God by the corner in all the revolutions in our life. It was Richard McBrien who wrote: “God has meaning and value for us because God is the source of our being as individual persons and as members of the total human community. We are alive by a principle which transcends us” (569).

CONCLUSION

Secularization as we have already seen above is not secularism which is an ideology; or a closed system or belief. Secularism can be regarded as a final extreme and can therefore be viewed as a way of living in which all appeals to anything beyond the horizon of human history are completely rejected. The result is a belief system in which man alone is regarded as the maker of his existence. In short, secularism is the affirmation of the radical autonomy of man. At the same time as secularism is a process by which religion loses its importance on the society's beliefs, norms and values, secularization can thus be said to be the transformation of institution, ideas and experience that were one the work of divine providence into the product of purely human thought and action. The process of secularization thus alienates man from the sacred outlook for the appreciation, understanding, assessment and approval of his own understanding of himself, his fellow creature and the world about him. In order to live one's faith in modern world therefore, men and women should not lose their distinctive place in the universe to become objects of science and technology particularly as it is happening in the Nigerian society which is one of the African societies, whose values that make up for a God-fearingsociety should never give way to secularism. Science and technology can be effectively used to provide for the well being of every one, while religion should take root in the heart of all, thereby including the spirit of self-discipline and dedicated service to one's fellow men. It is only then that secularization, which poses a big danger to the African continent, would give way to a secularized and yet a religious society.

WORKS CITED

- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Prisoner for God*, New York: Macmillan, 1954.
- Brown, David A., *A Guide to Religions*. London: SPCK, 1977.
- Callahan, Daniel, *The Secular City Debate*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1966.
- Cauthen Kenneth, *Science Secularization and God*. Nashville & New York: Abingdon Press, 1969.
- Clarke, Paul Barry and Andrew Lirizey, (editors) *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society*. London & New York, 1997.
- Durkheim, Emile, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 2015.
- International Missionary Council, Jerusalem Meeting Report, Vol. 1 (1928): 284.
- McBrien, Richard D., *Catholicism*. London: Geoffrey, 1988.
- Mozia, Michael I., *Mystagogy in Secular Age: A Pastoral Guide*. Ibadan: New Borne Publishers, 1998.
- New Catholic Encyclopedia, "Secularism", Vol. III, 36.
- Newbigin, Lesslie, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966.
- Omeregbe Joseph, I., *A Philosophical Look at Religion*. Ikeja, Lagos: Jaja Press Ltd, 1993.
- Richardson W. Herbert, *Towards an American Theology*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.
- Schillebeeckx, Edward, *God and the Future of Man*. London: Sheed & Word, 1969.
- The Oxford Dictionary* (2nd Edn.) Vol. VIX Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.
- Thomas, George F., *Philosophy and Religious Beliefs*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970.