



SECULARISM AND RE-EMERGENCE OF AFRICA: PERSPECTIVES ON THE NIGERIAN SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC RE-BIRTH

Michael Enyinwa Okoronkwo, PhD

National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja
meokoronkwo@noun.edu.ng

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Amos Francis Dike, PhD

paamosdike@gmail.com; <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1291-2319>

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Uzoma Amos Dike, PhD

National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja
udike@noun.edu.ng

Abstract

African under-development and insecurity have been attributed to many phenomena including the secularism concept. This paper explores the intricate relationship between secularism and Africa's socio-political and economic challenges. By examining etymological, historical, and contemporary perspectives, it investigates how the interplay of secular and religious ideologies has shaped Africa's course. The study delves into the challenges and opportunities presented by secularism in fostering inclusive governance, promoting human rights, and stimulating economic and political growth. Furthermore, it analyzes the role of secularism in addressing issues such as corruption, conflict, and inequality. The research adopts qualitative research method premised on comparative case study. This is due to the complexity of the topic. Ultimately, this research aimed to contribute to a rich understanding of the complex dynamics between secularism and Africa's ongoing development, providing insights for policymakers and scholars seeking to navigate this critical juncture. The research submits that secularism has the potential to enhance democratic governance by promoting pluralism and tolerance. It concludes that secularism is a sure way for equitable distribution of resources and social services.

Keywords: Secularism, Africa, Socio-political, Economic development, Religion

Introduction

Africa, a continent of immense cultural and religious diversity, is experiencing a period of stagnation and crisis. Once characterized by colonial subjugation and economic stagnation, the continent is now witnessing a resurgence marked by rapid religious conflicts. This is affecting the socio-political and economy life of the people. This reawakening presents a unique challenge for Africa to harness its potential and build a prosperous future for its people. Central to this process is the complex interplay between secularism and religion, two forces that have shaped the continent's history and continue to influence its present and future.



Secularism, often defined as the separation of religion and state,¹ has been a contentious issue in many parts of the world. In Africa, the concept of secularism intersects with deeply ingrained cultural and religious traditions, making its implementation a complex and multifaceted challenge. While some argue that secularism is essential for promoting democracy, human rights, and economic development, others contend that it undermines traditional values and social cohesion. The historical context of Africa is crucial to understanding the current dynamics between secularism and religion. The colonial era, in its imposition of Western values and institutions, disrupted traditional power structures and introduced new religious and ideological divisions. The post-colonial period witnessed a resurgence of religious identity as African nations sought to reclaim their cultural heritage in the midst of the notion and practice of secularism. This complex interplay of forces has created a diverse landscape in which secularism and religion coexist, often in tension. As such, Nigeria faces significant social and economic challenges, including insecurity, terrorism, and separatism.

Despite the challenges, there is growing recognition of the potential benefits of secularism for Africa's development. A secular state can provide a level playing field for people of all faiths, promoting social harmony and political stability. It facilitates the development of inclusive governance systems that represent the interests of the entire population. Moreover, secularism fosters critical thinking, innovation, and entrepreneurship, which are essential for economic growth. However, the implementation of secularism in Africa requires careful consideration of the continent's unique cultural and religious context. It is essential to find ways to balance the principles of secularism with the preservation of cultural and religious heritage. This requires a rich understanding of the specific challenges and opportunities faced by different African countries.

This research aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation by examining the relationship between secularism and Nigeria's socio-political and economic re-emergence. By exploring the experiences of Nigeria, this study identifies the factors that have influenced the success and failure of secularism in promoting development. Ultimately, this research offers insights into how secularism can be harnessed as a tool for building a more just, equitable, and prosperous Nigeria.

Methodology

To investigate the intricate relationship between secularism and socio-political and economic development, this research employs a comparative case study methodology. Given the complexity of the topic and the continent's diverse cultural, religious, and historical contexts, a qualitative approach is necessary. By examining Nigeria with reference to Ghana, Kenya and Mali who are countries with varying levels of secular influence, from strongly secular to predominantly religious, this research identifies common patterns and variations in the impact of secularism on socio-political and economic factors.

Theoretical Framework of Secularism

¹ A. Cline, Secularism as philosophy: Secularism as a humanistic. Retrieved from www.atheism.about.com/od/secularismeparation/a/philosophy.htm 2024, 12.



Secularism is a multifaceted process that marks a shift away from religious influence and toward worldly concerns. Derived from the Latin word "saeculum," meaning "age," it signifies a focus on contemporary, earthly matters rather than spiritual or divine ones.² Historically, secularization was characterized by the transfer of power and property from religious institutions to secular authorities, accelerated by events like the Reformation and the Enlightenment era. However, secularism is more than just an institutional change. It represents a broader cultural transformation, marked by the decline of traditional structures, the rise of science and nationalism, and a growing emphasis on rational, empirical explanations for life, leading to a "disenchantment" of the world.

Holyoake proposed a different view of secularization, describing it as the separation of religion from other societal functions, such as politics, law, and economics. This concept leads to a decline in religion's overall influence.³ In essence, secularism is a multifaceted process shaped by historical, institutional, and cultural factors that is required to collectively diminish the dominance of religion in contemporary society. While the concept of secularism may appear simple, it is a highly debated topic. Holyoake maintains that traditionally, it refers to the separation of religion and the state, a principle commonly found in Western democracies. However, when applied to diverse cultural contexts like Africa, the concept becomes more complex.⁴ Taylor's work on the "secular age" offers valuable insights into the global evolution of secularism, influenced by factors such as modernity, globalization, and religious resurgence. He explores how the decline of religion in the modern West has affected people's lives, arguing that belief and disbelief in God are not opposing ideologies, rather different ways of understanding the world. Both perspectives are shaped by personal experiences and cultural contexts. While believers find meaning in their faith, those without religious belief seek fulfillment through reason, nature, or self-examination. In everyday life, individuals actively create meaning for themselves by navigating these diverse worldviews.⁵ Taylor argues that the rise of secularism is not merely a decline of religion but a result of a religious reform movement aimed at deepening sacred devotion. This movement led to a more disciplined society and also a growing emphasis on human capabilities, rather than divine authority. Consequently, a world emerged where humans were seen as the center, paving the way for a secular outlook. Taylor identifies the economy, public life, and democratic governance as key areas that have shaped this new self-understanding.⁶ each operates independently of direct political control.

Habermas in his "public sphere theory," provides valuable insights into the role of secularism in promoting democratic deliberation and public reason. Habermas' liberal model of a public sphere presents a normative ideal, outlining how a public sphere should ideally function.⁷

² N. D. Cinjel, & F. O. Chujor, Secularism, religion and the rising challenges of national cohesion in Nigeria, 2000–2015. *International Journal of Religious and Cultural Practice*, 3(1), (2017). 1–11, 10.

³ G.J. Holyoake, *The origin and nature of secularism*, (London: Watts and co. (1846), 121

⁴ Holyoake, *The origin and nature of secularism*, 123.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age under Social Philosophy*, (USA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 87.

⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age under Social Philosophy*, 108

⁷ J. Habermas, "The public sphere" In *Rethinking popular culture. Contemporary perspectives in cultural studies*, Mukerji, C.; Schudson, M. (Ed.) (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 398-404, 400.



However, this idealized model does not fully reflect the reality of modern, industrialized democracies, particularly those with social welfare states and large populations, where the formation of a true public is often challenging.⁸ It is an idealistic model of democracy which is shaped through structural changes of society that ended in a transformed understanding of the public sphere. Rose and Miller's work on "governmentality" illuminates how secular power operates, particularly in relation to religion and culture. The relationship between secularism and governance is pivotal.⁹ A secular state is often associated with democratic principles, rule of law, and accountability. Berger's work on "democratic consolidation" offers a framework for understanding the role of secularism in stabilizing democratic regimes. The book provides a comprehensive analysis of how democracies emerged and became established in various parts of the world. It identifies key factors that influence the success or failure of democratic transitions, such as the previous type of government and the specific circumstances that led to change.¹⁰ The book begins by establishing a theoretical framework before delving into detailed case studies of various countries. Again, studies on the Islamic world, particularly those by Tibi and Roy, equip us with comparative insights into the interplay of religion and politics. This research on women's rights and Islam offers a comparative perspective on how secularism can impact gender equality.¹¹ Studies on minority rights, such as those by Mozaffar, present the discussion of how secularism protects marginalized groups.¹² Research on African political systems, such as the work of Alyaqoobi, also provides context for understanding how secularism intersects with traditional authority structures. It argues that secularism is often linked to the protection of human rights. It further argued that a secular state is better equipped to safeguard individual freedoms and prevent religious-based discrimination.¹³ This research work on religion and human rights explores the complex relationship between these two concepts.

Weber offers a classic perspective on the relationship between religion and economic development. He posits that the correlation between secularism, socio-political and economic development is a subject of ongoing debate.¹⁴ Some argue that secular states are more conducive to economic growth due to their emphasis on rationality and meritocracy. Huntington provides strength to this argument, suggesting that cultural factors, including religion, hinder socio-political and economic progress. Studies on African socio-political and economic development,¹⁵ such as those by Moyo and Acemoglu and Robinson, provide context for understanding the implications of secularism. Africa presents a unique context for studying

⁸ Habermas, "The public sphere" 401.

⁹ Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller, Political Power Beyond the State: Problematics of Government, in *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 43, 1992, 121.

¹⁰ P. Berger, "Secularism in retreat", *The National Interest*, 1997), 46, 3–13, 6.

¹¹ Tibi, Bassam. *Political Islam, world politics and Europe: From jihadist to institutional Islamism*. Routledge, 2014.

¹² Mozaffar, Shaheen. "Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management. By Benjamin Reilly. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 232p. 22.00 paper." *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 4 (2002): 865-866.

¹³ Alyaqoobi, Sarkawt. "Examining the Impact of Secularism and State-Religion Relations on Human Rights." (2022).

¹⁴ A.D. Gilbert, *The making of post Christian Britain*, (London: Longmann, 1980), 217

¹⁵ S. P. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Making of World History*, (New York: Simon Schuster, 1996), 179.



secularism due to its diverse religious landscape and colonial history. Seal provides foundational works on African history and culture, offering insights into the pre-colonial religious landscape. Studies on African independence and nation-building,¹⁶ such as those by Nyerere and Nkrumah,¹⁷ illuminate the role of secularism in post-colonial nation-building. Contemporary research on African religious movements and the rise of religious extremism provides context for understanding the challenges facing secularism in the region.

The debate between Christianity and Islam in Africa is rooted in centuries-old discussions about religion's role in society and politics. While French and Italian perspectives on secularism and faith may differ, these differences stem from broader views on religion, not specifically Islam. The search for a "de-emphasized religious space"¹⁸ in Africa is not a conflict between liberal, secular, traditional, and fundamentalist religious adherents; rather, it reflects Africa's ongoing struggle to define the role of religion. The central issue is not whether Islam or Christianity is compatible with secularism, but how to define and implement secularism as a legal, cultural, and political concept that supports socio-political and economic growth. Secularism and the separation of religion and state are not rooted in African values or Enlightenment philosophy. According to Dike, this political compromise is essential to ending religious wars and will be shaped by unique national paradigms. Each African country must navigate a stable compromise between religion and politics amidst centuries of violence.¹⁹ The Reformation in the 16th century disrupted religious unity in Europe and Africa, leading to decades of religious wars. The struggle was not between religion and tolerance, but between aligning the state, religion, and society.²⁰ It can be argued that wars of religion, not secularism and tolerance, shaped European political cultures. Today, religion remains a distraction in Africa, just as it was in Europe.

Secularism, Development and Religious Dynamics in Nigeria

In Nigeria, people of diverse faiths often interact and coexist. This can be attributed to the benefits of such interactions. For example, two neighbors, one Christian and one Muslim, might choose to be friends and cooperate because it offers companionship, support, and a sense of community. This aligns with social exchange theory, which suggests that people are drawn to interactions that fulfill their needs.²¹ In this case, religious interaction provides a sense of belonging, shared values, and opportunities for social connection. This reflects Marshall's definition of reward as positive reinforcements that meet individual needs.²² Religion often fulfills spiritual needs and creates opportunities for interaction with like-minded people. While each religion offers unique doctrines, people within religious groups also interact and establish common practices, highlighting the importance of reciprocal obligations as emphasized by Marshall. Religious communities foster a sense of community and shared understanding

¹⁶ Jeremy Seal, *Egypt: A Modern History*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 312.

¹⁷ Seal, *Egypt: A Modern History*, 313.

¹⁸ A. F. Dike, "Absolutism and Relativism in Religious Discourse: Pitfalls of Nigerian Pluralistic Society" PhD thesis, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Abuja, 2025. 9.

¹⁹ Dike, "Absolutism and Relativism in Religious Discourse", 176.

²⁰ D. N. Chentu, *Conflicting Christologies in the Context of Conflicts*, (Jos: ACTS, 2013). 114.

²¹ Marshall, *The Scramble for Africa*, 97.

²² Marshall, *The Scramble for Africa*, 96



through mutual obligations like attending services or participating in events.²³ Overall, studying how people of different religious backgrounds interact in Nigeria reveals the importance of social connection and the fulfillment of personal needs. It is not just about religious beliefs, but also about the benefits of interpersonal relationships within a diverse society.

Sociologist suggests that religion is a social creation designed to influence and control people's beliefs and behaviors.²⁴ God is viewed as a symbol of society, with divine laws and commandments representing societal values and norms. Some believe that a country should establish a state religion to encourage good religious behavior among its citizens. Abdullahi An-Na'im argues that people's behavior is influenced by their understanding of their circumstances, not just by following societal norms.²⁵ Nigeria's inclusion of secularism in its Constitution might be a result of historical experiences, like past conflicts or recognizing religious diversity. It could also be a way to meet the needs of the people or to maintain colonial control. An-Na'im warned that guaranteeing religious freedom in the Constitution could actually lead to its loss and cause unrest.²⁶ Empirical evidence in Nigeria appear to support this prediction.

In Nigeria, secularism drew its root and strength from chapter one and article 10 of the 1999 Constitution which states that, “the Government of the Federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion”.²⁷ As earlier mentioned, the word “secular” is the Latin word “saeculum” denoting an age or time, non-involvement in religious or spiritual affair and exclusion of religion from public affairs. It is the process by which religious element and dimension are being removed from a thing. A secular state on the other hand is a state in which the constitution transcends all persons and groups.

The Nigerian constitution pre-supposes that an individual has freedom to practice religion of his or her choice without government interference. This is where secularism comes into play. Secularism is a legal principle in Nigeria's supreme law, stating that religious beliefs should not influence public or government activities and decisions. In other words, secularism is a constitutional position that separates religion from the state. While individuals are free to practice any religion they choose, the government must not allow religious beliefs to influence public policy. Religion is the worship of God or gods. The term "religion" originated in the 13th century from Latin.²⁸ From a sociological perspective, society creates religion as a tool to shape, control, and direct societal thinking and behavior.²⁹ In a secular state, citizens are free

²³ Marshall, *The Scramble for Africa*, 97.

²⁴ Christiano, Kevin J., Peter Kivisto, and William H. Swatos. *Sociology of religion: Contemporary developments*. (Italy: Rowman & Littlefield, 2025), 121

²⁵ An-Na'im, Abdullahi *Secularism and Religious Freedom in Africa: A Comparative Study*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 213.

²⁶ An-Na'im, Abdullahi *Secularism and Religious Freedom in Africa*, 213.

²⁷ F. I. Ogoloma, “Secularism in Nigeria: An assessment” *AFRRV IJAH: An International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 1(3), (2012), 63–74, 67.

²⁸ E. Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life*. London, (Allen & Unwin, 1915), 157.

²⁹ B. B. Ghali, *An agenda for peace*, (New York: United Nations. 2008).



to practice any religion, but the state's laws, enforced through the constitution, take precedence over all other laws.

Nigeria is a heterogeneous state with different groups practicing diverse religion. The only emblem that gave the nation power over the diverse groups is the secular outlook which empowered the constitution over every institution. It also created a sense of balance and harmony among the diverse groups.³⁰ However, the place and position of religion has continued to compete with the state in Nigeria and the aftermath of their clash is violent conflict.³¹ Reasoning along similar line, Sampson posits that anyone saying Nigeria is a secular nation does not understand the meaning of the word “secular”.³² There is nothing secular about Nigerian nation since whatever we do will always put Islam and Christianity in the fore front. A statement by Archbishop Olubunmi Okogie, the Catholic Bishop of Lagos Diocese, represents a seeming Christian community’s perception on the relationship between the state and religion: “when you are in a position of trust, forget about your religion because it is a private affair between you and your God. If you want to bring religion in, let it be after office hours”.³³ On the other hand, Northern Muslims have consistently maintained a hostile view of secularism since independence in 1960, describing the concept as atheism or irreligion, a perception consistently expressed whenever reference is made to Nigeria as a secular state. The Jamma’ atul Nasril Islam (JNI) the society for the victory of Islam, argue that ‘secularism is a system of social teachings or organization which allows no part of religion’, while Sheikh Abubakar Gummi, the pillar of Islamic activist in Nigeria, said ‘a secular state is an atheistic state’.³⁴ Another Muslim intellectual, Ibrahim Suleiman, argues that “secularism is hostile to Islam. It seeks to undermine Islamic values, supplant the Islamic laws with those of its own and deface the sanctity of the Muslim society”.³⁵ With these divergent views of secularism by the two dominant religious groups, it is obvious that what the seemingly secular state bequeathed to Africans by the British colonialists is a crisis of identity.³⁶ No wonder, this has affected the socio-political and economic well-being of the nation.

Regardless of the popular misconceptions that surround it, secularism is not a principle of anarchy though there are many religious people who would give it this interpretation to condemn it. Secularism is a principle of tolerance. A society that is established on the principle of secularism does not force beliefs (or unbelief) on its citizens; neither does it limit the

³⁰ R.I. Gofwen, *Religious conflict in northern Nigeria and national building*, (Kaduna: Human rights monitor, 2010), 67.

³¹ O. Igwara, “Holy Nigeria nationalism and apocalyptic visions of the nations” *Nations and nationalism*, 1(3), (2007), 327–355, 341

³² I. T. Sampson, “Religion and the Nigerian state: Situating the de facto and de jure frontiers of state-religion relations and its implications for national security”. *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, 3(2), (2014), 311–339, 324

³³ A statement by Archbishop Olubunmi Okogie, the Catholic Bishop of Lagos Diocese

³⁴ Ugo Chuks Okolie, and Festus Osayand, “Secularism and National Development in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic: An Empirical Study” in *Humanities and Social Sciences: Latvia* (Volume 29(2), 65-89, 67.

³⁵ Okolie, and Osayand, “Secularism and National Development in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic”, 71.

³⁶ Sampson, “Religion and the Nigerian state”, 329



expression of people's beliefs, and even unbelief.³⁷ A secular state therefore, is when a state or country is officially neutral in matters of religion, supporting neither religion nor irreligion; a state that treats all its citizens equally regardless of religion or non-religiosity; and claims not to or ceases to give preferential treatment(s) to a citizen (or citizens) of a particular religion over another with different religions or non-religious affiliation(s). Historically, the characteristics of secularism are as follows:

1. Granting religious freedom.
2. Disestablishing state religions.
3. Stopping public funds from being used for a religion.
4. Freeing the legal system from religious control.
5. Freeing up the education system.
6. Tolerating citizens who change religion or abstain from religion.
7. Allowing political leadership to come to power regardless of religious beliefs.

Religion as the Problem of African Secularism

Religion, as one of the oldest human disciplines, is notoriously difficult to define. This is due to its evolution through various stages, from medieval times to the modern era. It has faced significant challenges from rationalists, Enlightenment thinkers, and modern thinkers who have questioned its relevance to societal development.³⁸ Gilbert defines religion as "any system of values, beliefs, norms, and related symbols and rituals arising from attempts by individuals and social groups to achieve certain ends, whether in this world or a further world, through supernatural means."³⁹ Similarly, Vernon defines it as "the cultural component composed of shared beliefs and practices that not only identify or define the supernatural and sacred and man's relationship to them but also relate them to the known world, providing the group with moral definitions of good and bad".⁴⁰ Iwuoha interprets "religious" as a capacity or power that enables humans to observe the laws of their nature, natural law, or divine law.⁴¹ According to Obiefuna and Uzoigwe, religion reflects, sustains, and legitimizes social order.⁴² Iwuoha believes that religion plays a unique role in building a developed nation because religious people advocating for national development could significantly accelerate progress.⁴³ Religious traditions in Nigeria hold moral authority and have a wide grassroots presence, placing them in a powerful position to influence the worldviews and lifestyles of millions of Nigerians. As noted, all religions possess one or more of five influential sources of power: shaping worldviews, wielding moral authority, having a large following, possessing strong

³⁷ A. J. Ademowo, Secularism, secularization and the secular Nigeria Project. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281750865> (2024), n.p.

³⁸ E. O. Gbadegesin, & E. A. Adeyemi-Adejolu, "Religion and challenges of development in Nigeria in 21st century" *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, 24, (2016), 23–31, 24.

³⁹ A. D. Gilbert, *The making of post Christian Britain*, (London: Longmann, 1980), 5.

⁴⁰ G. M. Vernon, *Sociology of Religion*, (New York: Megram Hill Book, 1962), 162.

⁴¹ C. M. A. Iwuoha, "The role of religion in Nigeria sustainable development" *International Journal of Theology and Reformed Tradition*, 6, (2014) 163–176, 170.

⁴² B. Obiefuna, & A. Uzoigwe, "Studying Religion for Sustainable Development in Nigeria" *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 13(1), (2012), 132–159, 12.

⁴³ Iwuoha, "The role of religion in Nigeria sustainable development", 171.



financial and institutional assets, and generating social capital for community building.⁴⁴ However, the growing number of religious bigots and extremists suggests that religion might not be relevant to societal development and should be removed from human social life. Religion has been used, abused, and misused by political elites and religious leaders, leading to conflicts in Nigeria and worldwide. Even in secular societies, religion has penetrated and remains a source of concern due to its damaging nature. Nigeria is one of many countries experiencing senseless killings and maiming of innocent lives, including women and children by Islamic extremists.

The northern ruling class became increasingly involved in promoting Islam, even seeking financial support from Arab countries. This led to the establishment of the Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) to spread Islam and convert non-Muslims.⁴⁵ In response to the government's actions and the growing influence of Islam in the north, the Christians formed the Northern Christian Association (NCA) to protect their interests. The NCA also addressed concerns about the government's use of the JNI to maintain political power and promote Islam. Kukah notes that not all Muslims are treated equally by the ruling class, though some Christians may choose to convert to Islam or adopt Hausa culture to gain social acceptance or better understand northern interests.⁴⁶ To gain support from southern Christians, the NCA changed its name to the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in 1964. This broader name allowed the organization to represent all Christians in Nigeria and provide a platform for unity, advocacy, and resource mobilization.⁴⁷ Consequently, JNI and CAN have continued as two rival absolutes.

Before British colonization, Nigeria had a system where cultural hierarchy influenced “government” affairs. The British continued this practice, using traditional leaders like chiefs and emirs to maintain political control. These leaders were both religious and political figures, and any opposition was seen as a threat to economic, social, religious, and political stability. Although the British promised not to interfere with Islam, their rule led to changes in Islamic law and practice to benefit both the ruling class and British interests.⁴⁸

The distribution of Christian and Muslim populations in Nigeria can be traced to the activities of Christian missionaries and Arab Jihadists. The Jihadists were the first to colonize northern Nigeria, and the British later exploited this religious divide to rule the northern territory. The British used a system of indirect rule, allowing local leaders to maintain control while influencing their decisions for economic and political gain.⁴⁹ Colonial influence led to changes in individual and family beliefs and practices, significantly impacting people's lives. The JNI and CAN, representing Muslims and Christians, respectively, play a significant role in creating socio-political and economic tensions under the guise of protecting and defending their members and promoting unity within their groups. Meanwhile, the Nigerian Constitution as earlier mentioned, explicitly states that "The Government of the Federation or of a State shall

⁴⁴ Gbadegesin & Adeyemi-Adejolu, “Religion and challenges of development in Nigeria in 21st century” 29.

⁴⁵ Matthew H. Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, (Ibadan: Spectrum books limited, 1993), 101.

⁴⁶ Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, 101.

⁴⁷ Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, 101.

⁴⁸ Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, 113.

⁴⁹ Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, 115.



not adopt any religion as a State Religion.”⁵⁰ This has led to a reevaluation of cultural identity, social relationships, and political and economic affiliations. While the specific details of religious conflicts during this period are beyond the scope of this discussion, it is important to note that the colonialists viewed both Christians and Muslims as products of modernization and social change, which helped them achieve their goals.

CAN and JNI as religio-political tools have grown into such strong associations over the years that create tension under the pretence of defending their religion, against what the Nigerian 1999 Constitution, Section 10 seemingly guarantees through freedom of association. There is a prohibition of State Religion whose authority revolves around the term 'secularism' of the Nigerian State, and by which it is further implied under Section 1(1): “This Constitution is Supreme and its provisions shall have binding force on all authorities and persons throughout the Federal Republic of Nigeria.”⁵¹ As a way of avoiding ambiguity, Section 1(3) of the Constitution further clarifies that: “If any other law is inconsistent with the provisions of this Constitution, this Constitution shall prevail, and that other law shall to the extent of the inconsistency, be void.”⁵²

Religious riot orchestrated by Maitatsine, the Shiite sects, Boko Haram, and Fulani Herdsmen holding tenaciously to their religious dogma including sacrificing anything including their own lives and those of other persons in pursuits of their heinous objectives, have in no small measure disturbed the relative peace and security of lives and properties of the inhabitants of this country.⁵³ In addition, the Nigerian Constitution stipulates that we are Nigerians first and then Christians and Muslims second. However, some fanatics from the north who are elected officials are insisting that Muslims are Muslims first and Nigerians second. By this, they are entitled to live by the Sharia Islamic Law.⁵⁴ These Muslim leaders always want the Constitution to be subordinate to Sharia law. Ogoloma posits that Sharia law is subordinate to the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. There should be no circumventing of the Constitution.⁵⁵ Sharia can never be superior to the constitution and wrong to operate two sets of contradictory laws in any state.

The return of multi-party democracy raised hopes as to the arrival of the solution of Nigeria's crises of governance – good governance, the rule of law, freedom as well as institutional, infrastructural, and national development. However, some religious activities have deterred the spate of political development in Nigeria, and negative religious fundamentalists in the northern region of the country have been discovered to be a threat to sustainable national development.⁵⁶ Religion in Nigeria functions as a means for the perpetration of violence, fueling ethnic prejudice and solidarity, acquisition of political power and socio-economic gains, massive killings and the wanton destruction of lives and vandalizing of the property of those considered infidels or who pay allegiance to other religions.⁵⁷ This is traced to the acrimony between the two dominant religions – Islam and Christianity, which had often

⁵⁰ The Nigerian 1999 Constitution, Section 10.

⁵¹ The Nigerian 1999 Constitution, Section 10.

⁵² The Nigerian 1999 Constitution, Section 10.

⁵³ Iwuoha, *The role of religion in Nigeria sustainable development*, 71.

⁵⁴ Ogoloma, *Secularism in Nigeria*, 73.

⁵⁵ Ogoloma, *Secularism in Nigeria*, 75.

⁵⁶ Iwuoha, “The role of religion in Nigeria sustainable development”, 69.

⁵⁷ Dike, *Absolutism and Relativism in Religious Discourse: Pitfalls of Nigerian Pluralistic Society*, 179.



resulted in the struggle for power and supremacy, bitter feud and wanton destruction of lives and properties. This religious psychosis like a cataclysmic vortex and devastate the ground for sustainable socio-economic development of Nigeria.⁵⁸ The emergence of Boko Haram and Herdsmen in northern Nigeria have negatively affected the political, economic, social, and environmental situation of the region and in extension Nigerian economy. Economic activities have almost been grounded by series of terrorist attacks in Plateau, Borno, Yobe, Sokoto and Benue States, leaving people stranded, jobless and some in internally displaced persons' camps (IDPs) in their home land. Many businessmen, companies both local and foreign have left some of these 'worst hit' states thereby depriving the government millions of tax revenue that would have been collected if economic activities were booming. The government is accused of diversion of money meant for the development of the country and the improvement of living standard of people to heavy spending on security.⁵⁹ This is a clear negative influence of religion on socio-political and economic development in Nigeria.

The apparent linkage between religion and national development attracts criticism. According to Cohen, there is either no logical reason to link religion to economic development or insufficient empirical evidence of any actual linkage.⁶⁰ Wallerstein expressed high skepticism of seeing capitalist development that is guided by religion. He argued that any complex system of ideas can be manipulated to serve any particular social or political objective.⁶¹ Any connection between religion and economics is likely one in which the latter is the cause and the former effect. Religion is not just a source of intolerance, human rights violations, and extremist violence, but also of non-violent conflict transformation, the defense of human rights, integrity in government and reconciliation and stability in divided societies.⁶² Therefore, if there must be development in Africa generally, and Nigeria in particular, finding common ground between Muslims and Christians cannot be negotiated. This is because, if Muslims and Christians are not at peace as we are presently witnessing, there cannot be any meaningful development. Development in Africa is at stake if these two major world religions refuse to cooperate.⁶³ Both religions (Islam and Christianity) should accommodate other religious faiths, especially the African Traditional religions, instead of denigrating and demonizing them.

The analysis above reveals that, though opposition to secularism is ostensibly founded on its apparent anti-religiosity, the concept does not necessarily connote agnosticism or atheism. Instead, the cultural basis of religion as a pivot for political mobilization has been exploited by politicians to portray secularism as promoting atheism and moral degeneracy. This perception has served to degrade the utility of secularism while reinforcing an unholy matrimony between religion and politics at the expense of national security and development. Nigerian politicians have historically leveraged religion and religious identity to gain political advantages for themselves. The elite have used religion as a tool of exploitation to achieve selfish socio-economic ends, while politically deploying religious fanaticism and favouritism to polarize the people and sustain unhealthy tension in the country. Till date, public officials use public funds

⁵⁸ O. K. Ngele, "Religion, politics and ethnicity: Challenges of pluralism in Nigeria development" *Bassey Andah Journal*, 1, (2008), 177–190, 180.

⁵⁹ O. O. Ajaegbu, "Religion and national development in Nigeria" *American Academic & Scholarly Research Journal*, 4(4), (2012), 1–6, 4.

⁶⁰ J. Cohen, *Protestantism and capitalism: The mechanism of influence*, (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2002), 132.

⁶¹ Wallerstein, I. *The modern world system*, (New York: Academic Press, 1974),

⁶² Ajaegbu, "Religion and national development in Nigeria", 5.

⁶³ Gbadegesin & Adeyemi-Adejolu, "Religion and challenges of development in Nigeria in 21st century" 30.



as a tool for political patronage, thereby generating resentment and outrage from rival religious groups.⁶⁴

Given Nigeria's present multi-religiosity, and having reference to the disgusting inter-religious relations that are created by the blurred relationship between religion and politics, subscription to true secularism is strongly advocated. Secularism and national development are seemingly inseparable. Okolie and Osayande had advocated for the establishment of an institute for secularism and religious pluralism. An institute charged with the onus of research and publication as well as advocacy in these fields of study. The authors argue that once sufficient awareness has been developed of the shared values of religion, the desired values of religious pluralism and the fundamental principles of secularism, a constitutional recognition of secularism would be made easier.⁶⁵ As long as the religious adherents are largely ignorant or at most ill-informed concerning what secularism represents, the religious power blocs would continue to present their self-seeking conception of secularism, with the clandestine aim of preserving the status quo, which benefits them⁶⁶ at the expense of national development. Nigerian secularism is an aberration. True secularism promotes pluralism and dispersal of governmental powers, which is good for a multi-religious and ethnic society like Nigeria. Secularism and national development are implicitly related and mutually complementary and compatible. Indeed, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of socio-political and economic rebirth if Nigeria failed to subscribe to the tenet of original secularism as advocated in the literary interpretation of the Constitution. National development can exist only where there is subscription to true secularism; the absence of national development is, ipso facto, the absence of secularism as advocated in the Nigerian Constitution. It can be gleaned from the constitutional provisions examined above that there is an understanding, in principle, among all Nigerians that state affairs should be separated from religious affairs.⁶⁷ This could be achieved through intellectual development and strong adherence to the principle of secularism and de-emphasizing of religious beliefs and practices within the Nigerian public space.

Secularism and Conflict Resolution

Religious differences have often been exploited to fuel conflicts in Africa. Ideally, secularism contributes to conflict resolution by: promoting religious tolerance and understanding; creating inclusive governance structures; facilitating dialogue between different religious groups and preventing the use of religion to justify violence. Comparative analysis of African governance models reveals that the impact of secularism on political systems on countries with strong secular foundations, such as South Africa and Botswana, can be contrasted with those where religion plays a more prominent role in governance like Nigeria and Kenya.⁶⁸ Countries that have experienced religious conflicts, such as Nigeria and Kenya, questions the role of secularism in conflict prevention and resolution. Secularism should be a critical component of

⁶⁴ Sampson, "Religion and the Nigerian state", 330.

⁶⁵ Okolie and Osayande, "Secularism and National Development in Nigeria's Fourth Republic" An Empirical Study" 77.

⁶⁶ Sampson, "Religion and the Nigerian state", 331.

⁶⁷ Okolie, Ugo Chuks, and Festus Osayande. "Secularism and National Development in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: An Empirical Study." *Humanities & Social Sciences Latvia* 29, no. 2 (2021), 156-168, 160.

⁶⁸ Cinjel, N.D., & Kachi, J. Ethno-religious conflict in Barkin Ladi local government of plateau state. *Nigerian Journal of Public Administration*, 4(3), (2015). 83–90.



good governance in Africa. By promoting political pluralism, protecting human rights, and reducing the potential for corruption and conflict, secularism contributes to the stability and development of African nations.

Secularism and Human Rights in Africa

To fully comprehend the relationship between secularism and human rights in Africa, it is essential to clarify these terms. Human rights are fundamental rights belonging to all individuals, regardless of their background or characteristics. They are universal, interconnected, and cannot be divided. Secularism is the principle of separating religion and the state. It promotes a society where individuals can practice their religion freely without government interference and where the government does not favour any particular religion. Though not identical, secularism is often considered a cornerstone for protecting human rights. It creates a level playing field where all individuals, regardless of their religious beliefs, are treated equally under the law. Ironically, secularism is often a guarantor of religious freedom. It prevents the establishment of a state religion, ensuring that all faiths are treated equally. It also protects individuals from religious coercion and discrimination. However, the concept of secularism can be misinterpreted as hostility towards religion. Ideally, secularism does not suppress religion but rather creates a space for its free practice without imposing it on others. Research reveals countries where secularism has fostered religious harmony and those where it has led to religious tensions.

Secularism and Economic Development in Africa

Economic development is a multifaceted process involving sustained increases in a nation's wealth and well-being. It includes factors such as GDP growth, poverty reduction, infrastructure development, human capital formation, and technological advancement. Secularism, as previously defined, is the separation of religion and the state. In the context of economic development, secularism implies a focus on rational, evidence-based policies, free from religious dogma. It promotes a level playing field for businesses and individuals, regardless of their religious affiliations. A comparative analysis of African economies sheds light on the link between secularism and economic development. South Africa with strong secular foundations compared to Nigeria who is with significant religious influence in economic policymaking. The difference reflects on the GDP growth rates, foreign direct investment (FDI), human development indices, and corruption levels.

A secular environment is often perceived as more conducive to investment. It signals to investors that the government is committed to rational, predictable policies, free from religious interference. Additionally, secularism can contribute to a more stable investment climate by reducing the risk of religious-based conflicts. Specific factors to consider include the strength of the rule of law, often associated with secularism, impact on investor confidence. Transparency and accountability in secular governments tend to attract investors more. Religious tolerance in secular environment creates a more inclusive business climate.



Finding/Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The analysis has relied on a broad overview of the topic, and more in-depth research is needed to fully capture the complexities involved. Additionally, the study has focused primarily on the theoretical aspects of secularism, further empirical research is required to strengthen the evidence. The exploration of the relationship between secularism and Africa's re-emergence has revealed several key findings. Firstly, secularism is intricately linked to human rights, governance, economic development, and societal progress. Secondly, while challenges such as deep-rooted religious influence and weak institutions impede secularism's implementation, its potential benefits for Africa are immense. Thirdly, civil society, government, and religious leaders have critical roles in promoting secularism.

The findings of this analysis have significant implications for policy and practice. Governments should prioritize the development and implementation of secular policies, investing in education and awareness campaigns to foster a better understanding of secularism. Strengthening institutions and the rule of law is essential to create an enabling environment for secular governance. Civil society organizations should continue to advocate for secularism, monitor human rights, and build coalitions to amplify their impact. Religious leaders can play a constructive role by promoting religious tolerance and supporting secular education.

The intricate relationship between secularism and Africa's re-emergence is a complex and multifaceted issue. This research has explored how secularism has influenced the continent's socio-political and economic landscape, revealing both challenges and opportunities. Findings from this study suggest that secularism can be a catalyst for progress in Africa. By promoting pluralism, tolerance, and human rights, secularism can contribute to the creation of more inclusive and democratic societies. Moreover, it can foster economic growth by creating a conducive environment for investment and innovation. However, the successful implementation of secularism requires careful consideration of the continent's diverse cultural and religious contexts.

While some nations have experienced positive outcomes, others have faced challenges in balancing secular principles with religious and cultural traditions. Therefore, to fully realize the potential of secularism, African countries must adopt a pragmatic approach that respects religious and cultural diversity while upholding the principles of equality and justice. This requires strong institutions, effective governance, and a commitment to education and civic engagement. In conclusion, while challenges persist, the potential benefits of secularism for Africa are substantial.

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Department of Philosophy, Imo State University Owerri, Nigeria

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