



CONTEMPORARY SECULARISM AND ITS DEADLY BLOW ON THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION, ATR

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Abstract

It is a clear fact that African Traditional Religion is contemporarily at the verge of extinction due to the contemporary fast-growing nature of secularism in the world and in African society especially. This contemporary secularism, if not checked may endanger the future of the African Traditional Religion. This article therefore, explores the historical development and the rising influence of contemporary secularism and its threat on the survival of African Traditional Religion (ATR). As secular ideologies make its ways across Africa, they threat not only global religious systems but also the deeply rooted indigenous beliefs that form the core of African spirituality. The paper defines key concepts, examines the African worldview and the essence of ATR, and analyzes the growing nature of secularism. It evaluates effect of secularism on religion broadly, and ATR specifically, highlighting the existential threat it poses. The article conclusively proposed remedies to preserve ATR amidst increasing secularism in our contemporary society.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, secularism, African worldview, cultural erosion, spirituality

1. Introduction

Africans are notoriously religious, as John Mbiti would popularly describe them. Following the assertion of Mbiti, a contemporary scholar of ATR, Innocent Nweke posits that there is no part of the African man's activities on the daily basis that is not in one way or the other influenced by ATR (2017). Traditionally, African people are the people well known for identifying with their religion and culture wherever they find themselves and in whatever they do. Most times when we speak of Africa some people think of Africa as one small single community located at one small geographical area. It is to be noted that Africa is a very large continent with a strong communal identity. This strong communal identity holds the Africans together whether white or black so that colour does not define an African but his religion and culture and his traditional worldview about life; about man, the Supreme Being and the spirits. Thus, African Traditional Religion (ATR) is a complex system deeply embedded in the cultural, social life and spiritual life of African peoples. This religion of the Africans forms their identity, explains the totality of their being; their morality, their ethical standards and their cultural values. Thus, traditionally, Africans are known to hold on strongly to their belief systems. However, in recent decades, it has faced significant decline. One of the most critical threats is contemporary secularism, which promotes a freelance life separated from religious authority and tradition. This paper critically examines how contemporary secularism undermines ATR's relevance, structure, and future and proposes possible remedies for the continuous existence of ATR.



2. Definition of Key Concepts

2.1 Secularism: Secularism is all the attempts to treat religion as an object of suspicion to be kept out of the public sphere. To treat religion just as any other doctrine without more privilege to the public life because of a need for neutrality rooted in an ideal of, at best fairness, or at worst, hatred of it. Similarly, the belief that the dilemma endemic to modern political life- those points at which rational processes breaks down and moral decision is necessary can be overcome through the adherence to specific principles- principles that relegate any non-pragmatic and scientific idea and promote pragmatism scientific technology. Madu (2003) simply described secularism as a mood pervading in an era in history (p.18). But this description does not capture the real definition of secularism as it seems to have swept the nature and goal of secularism under carpet. It is rather clearer in the definition of Nweke (2017) who defined secularism in two ways. For him, “Secularism can thus be said to be the expulsion of God, superstition and enthronement of reason” (p.1). This definition pictures more the goal of secularism as an attempt by human beings to ‘liberate’ themselves from God and religious tentacles. Nweke went on to say that “secularism can be summed as the enthronement of reason, individual and expulsion of the divine, superstition and metaphysical conception of God in the world” (2017, p.12). Shorter and Onyancha (1997, p.14) presents secularism as a situation where religious faith is taken as superfluous based on one reason or another and religion itself losses its grip at the level of human consciousness. Shorter and Onyancha through the words of Nweke summarised the definition of secularism “as the denial of the existence of God or any other religious dimension to human life (2017, p.1). It is very simple and clear that secularism is the situation where man is estranged from God and His authoritative control and extricated himself from the trap of religious tentacles.

2.2 African Traditional Religion (ATR): ATR is the way of life of the Africans, their religion, their culture, their tradition and their worldview. Every life of the African is embedded in their religion. That is why Mbiti said that ATR comprises indigenous religious beliefs and practices of African peoples, rooted in oral tradition, community rituals, and ancestral veneration (1991). On his own account Nweke as a contemporary scholar of African Traditional Religion sees ATR as the indigenous religion of the Africans which is found and rooted in all the activities of an African man including the way the Africans worship God (2017). Little wonder Awolalu and Dopamu presents ATR as a religion without written literature yet it permeates all in-depth life of every African. It is written boldly in the life of every African for those who care to see and read. It is in their myths and folklores, songs and dances, and in their proverbial sayings (1997, p.2).

2.3 Contemporary Secularism: Contemporary secularism takes different shapes and modes as the world civilises and as globalisation evolves. This form of secularism includes modern global ideologies and technologies that encourage individualism, materialism, contemporary feminism, homosexuality and lesbianism as right and a complete shift from the sacred to the secular in everyday life (Casanova, 2011). Contemporary secularism according to Taylor refers to a principle that separates religion from political, educational, and public life. It often promotes human reason and science over spiritual or religious authority (2007). According to contemporary definition of Kosmin cited in Atta (2010) in one sense contemporary secularism



may assert the right to be free from religious rule and teachings and right to freedom from governmental imposition of religion upon the people within a state that is neutral on matters of belief. Then, in another sense it refers to the view that human activities and decisions, especially political ones, are to be based on evidence and facts, unbiased by any religious input (p.14). But for Atta, Contemporary secularism includes, though not restricted to, the deliberate departure from traditional religious beliefs, whether explicit or tacit undue insistence on the application of innovative scientific and philosophical forms and even outright attempt to appraise religion and beliefs based solely on contemporary science, philosophies and criticisms (2010, p.14). Nweke (2017, p.137) referred to contemporary secularism as a belief that as societies progress, particularly through modernisation and rationalisation, religion loses its authority in all aspect of social life and governance. For me, contemporary secularism is not just a deviation from religion or freedom from governmental authority but a situation where the religion is used as an object of denigration and a situation where man wills to make individual laws void of morality for himself and live by the law he has made, exempted from any external force or control.

2.4 Cultural Erosion: This is a situation where the cultural identity of a people is swept under carpet through culture contact and the emulation of the foreign culture by the natives. The coming of Christianity and the activities of the colonial masters have advocated for the swept out of the African culture with its traditional religious and moral values.

2.4 Spirituality: This refers to the aspect of a people, a society or persons which directs them to their God and controls their religious activities. Spirituality of a person determines to a great extent the person's relation with the divine and the supernatural beings. The spirituality of the Africans is embedded in the African Traditional Religion.

3. Worldview of the Africans

At the core of every people's life and culture lies the worldview that constitute the control box of culture that determines thinking, acting or doing and determining values (Nweke, 2017, p.101). Worldview then, according to Fowkes and Mandel is a construct about the makeup of life of a people as it struggles with the question of reality, truth, ethics and history. It is a construct that explains a point of view of a people, their sense direction, their focus of destination and the strategy of their thought and life actions (1992, p.105). Mbama (2020) asserts that there are two inseparable worlds in African worldview: the spirit world and physical world. These two worlds are interconnected. Though the spirit world controls the physical world, the living in the physical world influences the actions of the spirit world (p.26). "This implies that there is constant interaction and dependence between the Ultimate being and the source of everything and all created things" (Nweke, 2017, p.102). For the Africans therefore according to Nweke there is thin or no separation between the two worlds (p.102). Thus, the African worldview is spiritual and holistic. Life is not divided into sacred and secular. The spiritual realm (God, deities, ancestors) is inseparable from daily life. Community, tradition, and reverence for ancestors are core values (Gyekye, 1996). In this worldview, misfortunes are often explained spiritually, and rituals serve as tools for balance and healing. The African worldview interprets the social, political, cultural, moral and economic activities of the society from the religious point of view so that, traditionally, God cannot be separated from the African man and all his activities.



4. The Nature of African Traditional Religion

Speaking about the nature of ATR here, we mean those essential qualities by African Traditional Religion concretely manifests itself in human society, that is, the specific character of this religion.

4.1 Oral and Community-based nature: ATR is non-scriptural, community-based, and experiential. It involves the worship of a Supreme Being through intermediaries (lesser gods or deities, ancestors) and centres on festivals, sacrifices, and taboos (Awolalu&Dopamu, 1979). It is passed down orally and closely tied to culture and environment.

4.2 A religion of the mind: ATR is a religion of the mind in the sense that, despite that there is no written literature for it, all the values and moral standards and codes of conduct of the religion is inscribed in the life of every traditional African: his attitude towards life, manner of relationship with others and his approach to spiritual and sacred values. It is a religion of the mind because it is experiential and it is lived out by the adherents even without having any holy writ or monumental buildings for daily gathering and instructions.

4.3 The complexity of the religion: The religion is complex in all dimensions of African traditional life-: sociological, psychological, cultural, economical, and political owing to the enormous size of African continent which also presents a problem of a comprehensive study and understanding of the religion with its variable manifestations in different and diverse African ethnic groups.

Nevertheless, if we define religion as man's awareness of, and response to the sacred transcendent sacred ultimate (personalised or impersonalised) the wholly other, on whom man entirely depends for his total existence, expressible in human society through belief, ethical or moral behaviour and worship, then ATR is truly religion.

5. Historical Development of Secularism

Every ideology begins as a movement. But at a point in history it becomes a theory or an ideology. So also, is the case of secularism. Nweke, a contemporary scholar of African Traditional Religion who decried the threat of secularism to ATR, traced the origin or the rising of secularism to the rationalist philosophers of the western world. He is of the view that the sophists like Protagoras, Gorgias, and Thrasymachus, and the classical philosophers like Epicurus, Rene Descartes, Fredrick Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Soren Kierkegard, were the brain behind secularism and the secularisation of the society by shifting the attention of the society from the metaphysical part to the material aspect. They ignored every spiritual aspect of life and focused attention on man and the society with its material of physical nature (2017). In Africa, Nweke blamed the development of secularism on the movie industry, the youth, the Christianity, and the African authors (2017).



6. The Growing Nature of Secularism in our Contemporary Society

Secularism is advancing globally through education, media, science, and technology. African societies, influenced by globalisation, are increasingly embracing Western values of autonomy, rationalism, and individualism. Urbanisation and modern education reduce exposure to traditional beliefs (Berger, 1999). “Undeniable in the growing secularism is the impact of French Revolution with its sensational promises of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité* not just on Christianity but on religion in its entirety

7. Agents of Secularism

There are many and numerous agents of secularism but I will mention and briefly discuss two for the want of space.

7.1 Modern Science: The modern secularism is characterised by the question of knowledge, that is, epistemology, different from ontological and metaphysical concerns of antiquity and the religious preoccupations of the medieval period. Descartes is well known as one of the creators of the modern science. The effect of the monumental scientific-technological damage on religion and belief system is very deep for the advances in sciences gave rise to the challenges and contestations of formerly held religious beliefs both Christian and traditional beliefs. More than half a century ago, R. Niebuhr, the famous American Protestant Theologian lamented the secularisation of the modern civilisation as partly due to our inability to adjust the ethical and spiritual interests of mankind to the rapid advance of the physical sciences. He noted that however much optimists may insist that science cannot ultimately destroy religion, the fact remains that the general tendency of scientific discovery has been to weaken not only religious but also ethical values (Atta, 2010, p.15). As such, humanism and religion have been engulfed in the naturalism of the contemporary society. Thus, our obsession with the physical sciences and with the physical world has enthroned the brute of nature.

7.2 Civilisation: So many errors came into existence in the name of civilisation. These errors came in disguise of fighting for the human right in the society with the special mission to relegate God and any form of religious activities in the society. For instance, feminism or feminist movement arose contemporarily in the name of fighting for the right of women. Recently, the homosexuality and lesbianism are craving its right of official existence and right and freedom of public practice by the adherents.

8. The Effect of Secularism on the Society and Religion in General

Godfrey Onah aptly observed this contemporary challenge of secularism to religion. He made the observation that despite the fact that religion has always had an impact on world views held along history and that one could possibly argue that cultural values are sacralised by religion so that they may become less relative, yet there is an attempt in our contemporary society to expel religion from the cultural context and leave the terrain free for secularised materialism or materialistic secularism (2010). Secularism does not challenge only the religious sphere but also a threat to the moral and even political development of the society. In view of this, Atta (2010)



observed that the “Increasing incidence of secularism, a negation of the place and value of religion has remained a subject of concern to many. Hence, some political and religious leaders had, and have, expressed fear and disquiet on its inherent dangers to humanity. For instance, the Founding Fathers of American Constitution were convinced that in any well-ordered democratic government, religion played a crucial role in protecting legitimate pluralism (p.14). Secularism challenges the authority and necessity of religion. It replaces religious explanations with scientific reasoning and undermines the role of religious leaders. In many parts of the world, church attendance and religious influence on politics have declined significantly due to secular values (Bruce, 2002). Also in 2007, C. Hitchens in his book, *God is not Good: How religion poisoned everything, ridiculed God and religion*. He had asked the question: Does religion do more harm than good? and in response he gave a deafening YES as an answer; even describing any belief as unnecessary and declaring religion guilty of almost all that is wrong in human history, both past and present (cited in Atta, 2010, p.15). There is also the ruling of European Court of Human Right on November 10, 2009, banning crosses from public schools in Italy, on the basis that it is an impingement on the right of a Finnish mother’s right to raise her children in a secular way. This ruling is another case in point of the extent we have gotten today in secularism.

9. The Effect of Secularism on African Traditional Religion

Indeed, from the late 19th century till date ATR with the culture that gave birth to it was at the mercy of the modern forces of social change: Christianity, Islam, colonialism and post-colonialism, western education, modern technology, urbanisation, migration and secularism. However, ATR is particularly vulnerable to secularism because it lacks formal institutions, written scriptures, and global representation. Secularism promotes cultural dislocation, making young Africans ashamed or indifferent to their heritage. Sacred rituals are seen as outdated or superstitious (Iroegbu, 2005). Contemporary secularism has made the ground free in Africa to allow feminism, homosexuality, and lesbianism to creep into the African societies, thereby posing a very big threat to the African Traditional Religion. Yes, feminism, homosexuality and lesbianism have permeated all aspects of life including religion. It is gradually paving its way in the ATR.

Feminism itself is a belief that women are being marginalised and a movement for the emancipation of women. (Ezechukwu, 2010, P.33). Homosexuality and lesbianism on the other hand is a cult or group of people fighting for the public establishment and constitutional right for same sex marriage. These challenges are no more western as they are used to be known; they are contemporarily in Africa in reality threatening every aspect of the African life including ATR and its traditional beliefs and values.

Social media on its part has done a lot of harm to the values of ATR. Nweke cried bitterly about this continuous deadly blow of secularised social media and ICT to the ATR in our contemporary society. In his words, the impact of secularism on social and cultural aspects is seen to be related to the role of media and ICT like TV and internet, which occupy a central position in contemporary living. Both have adverse effects on African traditional rules and faith, primarily because those controlling them are very insensitive of religion and religious tenets and



moral values, thereby introducing values that are entirely alien to the ATR and even religion in general (2020, p.18). In the same manner, Nweke still cried out about the dangerous effect of secularism on the educational life of the Africans owing to the fact that education is the cornerstone of all human societies. For him, the secularised nature of our education system in Africa is very much alarming and is considered seriously dangerous since education is directly responsible for the intellectual quality of human life (2020, p. 16).

In effect of the secularised nature of the education system in Africa, the moral conducts of the contemporary African youths is in a sorry state. This is because, formal or classroom education reached to us from the west. Then, secularism from the same west is penetrating into this education introducing a separation between morality and religion. In the western ideology, it is claimed that morality and religion are two different entities that should not interfere in one another. But in African Traditional Religion and culture it is not true and not correct. Rather, the moral organisation of the society is a product of the crucial role of religion. Thus, Nweke (2020) averred that the western secularism that advocates for the separation of morality from religion is obviously wrong and contradicts human nature (p.16). Separation of morality from religion according to Nweke is the separation of God and Divine guidance from the human moral conduct which will certainly lead to a confused situation in the society (2020, p.16).

Additionally, the rise of atheism, liberal values, and digital culture alienates youth from communal practices; as such the contemporary African youth are watering down the African cultural values by putting things up side down in the name of ATR (Nweke, 2020, p19). It is traditionally known that traditional Chiefs, native Chief Priests, and native healers in Africa are treated with respect in the society in reverence to the God of African Traditional Religion, considering the power they wield from God (Nweke, 2020, p.19).. But contemporarily, traditional healers and priests are often discredited in favour of Western medicine and psychology, weakening ATR's social role.

10. The Threats of Secularism to the Future of African Traditional Religion

The future of ATR is endangered by:

10.1 Loss of oral tradition due to Western education: Most of the African elders are losing the grip of the African oral historical tradition by embracing Christianity and western education. And even some educationists are living a secularised life void of any form of religious spirituality. They are gradually losing their African historical identity and so, has nothing to pass to the next generation.

10.2 Erosion of communal values and ancestral reverence: It has been derogatorily condemned by the western religions that the reverence to the African ancestors are idol worshipping even when they reverence their founders and those believed to have played crucial roles in the spread of their religion. This has permeated into the life of most Africans today that it is seen as fetish by themselves. In the same manner, western individualism that came to Africa with their education and religion has caused the Africans to relegate their communalism to the background.



10.3 Disinterest among youth, especially in urban areas: I agree with Nweke (2017) that in a bid to be independent, the African youth struggle to assert themselves and sometimes derail from the known facts and values that the Africans are known for, especially when they find themselves in a foreign land where they indulge in different forms of immoral acts in order to make money (p.126). The contemporary African youth indulge in different casual sexual activities which most times result to unwanted pregnancy, leading to the desecration of human life in the name of abortion. Cultism in the schools and in the society in general has made our youth to lose the sight of the sacredness of human life.

10.4 Negative portrayal of ATR in media and education: Nweke made it clear that despite the positive contributions of the movie industry in the society, “In Africa for instance the impression and message which the movie industry keeps on people’s mind is something else other than protecting African culture” (2017, p. 124). In the same manner, education system in Africa has been secularised. Thus, Nweke (2020) averred “Under the influence of secularism, the importance of God is eliminated almost completely from public education, thus, it is not essential to the end or purpose of education. The common implication of such elimination is either God has no place of reverence in education or it is a matter of private concern” (p.16). That is why Sorrell states that “In a secular system of education, knowledge is gained through certain methods like experimental method, experience, rational thinking, and the scientific method” (1991, p.136). Nweke is not against experiential and practical or experimental scientific knowledge but taking God out of the way is problematic because “Such secular system of education has failed to inspire the new generation with moral and religious values, thus led the society to immoral and irreligious life” (2020, p.16)

Sincerely speaking, if these current trends continue, ATR may become museum culture preserved only for display, not for practice.

11. Any Remedy for African Traditional Religion in the Midst of Contemporary Secularism

The yes of Nweke to the above question is emphatic. He is emphatic that the efforts of the agents of secularism to undermine the Africa traditional Religion and African God is fruitless because “... as they make effort to water down the values, the more African God is becoming relevant because Africans in their nature are religious and had no inclination, tendency or penchant for discussing what will estrange their relationship with their God” (2020, p.19). in view of that, I am also of the view that the imperative to grapple with the challenge of secularism is an indispensable task. It thus behoves the adherents of different religions in general and African Traditional Religion in particular to rise up to it. There is no negating the necessity of concerted defence of worthwhile values of African Traditional Religion to its adherents and to the humanity in general. It is necessary that the values that aid human life and progress should be promoted by all and sundry irrespective of religious affiliation. For instance, sacredness of human life, respect for authority and elders are among such values in African Traditional Religion and goes beyond any selfish interest. Atta on another note recommends that on the one hand, religious leaders should aggregate their efforts in confronting the situation individually exhibiting in words and deeds, exemplary leadership. On the other hand, the political leaders



should avail every person of his or her Right or Freedom of Religion as enshrined in the Article 18 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He warns that a situation where some religious leaders keep mum in the face of unwarranted attack on other religions or align with some misguided political leaders to whittle down the effort of other religions or any barraging of any genuine religion such as ATR simply for the reason of the sound doctrine she espouses are all condemnable. (2010, p.16). The values of African Traditional Religion are inestimable as such they must be upheld by her adherents and the teachers of ATR. Lombardi (2009) and Ekwunife (2015) aptly observed that religion in general and ATR in particular gives a precious contribution to the formation and moral growth of the people and it is an essential component of human civilisation. It is the most patent means of socialization and educational training in values and virtues. As moral guide, it has both declaration stance (what ought to be done, positive and negative aspects, what ought to be avoided) i.e. taboos for healthy human/superhuman relationships. Thus, it is very myopic awkward to try to remove it from human life and education. The teachers of ATR must realise that they must live out and help others to live the values taught by ATR. Africans are known traditionally for their standard moral conduct and were as much positively as it was before civilisation due to these ATR values. It is true that ATR has no written literature or gigantic structure for worship, but the values are written in the minds of the Africans and they are to be rekindled. Again, I suggest that ATR need not, and should not be conceptualised into anyone of the known western philosophical mould like monotheism, polytheism, theism, deism, pantheism, and so on. This is exactly what Nweke (2020) echoed: that African Traditional Religion is inseparable from the African Traditional culture, thus, one needs to understand African culture and the background before making any juxtaposition of ATR with any other culture or religion (p. 19).

12. Recommendations

Despite the challenges, ATR can survive if:

Scholars document and teach ATR academically and as well practice it in their way of life.

Communities revive festivals and rites in engaging ways as Nweke (2020) observed that despite the challenges some “Modern African youths have tried to modernise some of the African cultures like the new yam festivals, masquerade cults etc” (p.19).

Digital platforms are used to promote indigenous knowledge rather than bastardising it on the media and movies.

Cultural pride history and traditional religious education among the youth is taken very serious.

Interreligious dialogue encourages mutual respect. For example, the neglect of ATR among the Christianity and Islam in Africa need to be tackled.

Legal protections are ensured for indigenous practices. This takes place if people like Late Chief Chuba Okadigbo, former senate president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, who loves African values and practices African Traditional Religion not just in worship but in worthy living, are elected into political positions in African.



13. Conclusion

Having viewed the challenges of the contemporary secularism on ATR; tracing its origin and development, noting its agents and its general effect on the society, I cannot suggest that we eliminate development and civilisation or going backward. Yet I strongly believe that revival depends on reimagining ATR not as primitive, but as culturally rich and spiritually relevant religion by the teachers of ATR, adherents of ATR, the African youth and Africans in general .

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