



ATR GOD IN THE SECULARISED WORLD IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

In a world where religion seems to be fading away, churches are less full, one religion attacking the other, especially Christianity attacking ATR, science is more trusted, and money seems to be ruling everything. God has not vanished; instead, He is pushed by the side, in the quiet awe of sunset. The ATR God saw herself in this situation and keeps struggling to make a mark, irrespective of what she faces. The work used a sociocultural approach. In its findings, it was discovered that ATR God has suffered a lot of criticism this century, and that ATR God has also suffered a lot at the hands of other religions. Also, it was discovered that irrespective of what the ATR God has suffered, it is still making some impact through the struggles she is going through. The work recommends that materialism should be embraced with care, it also recommends that all should value God and call on them all the time, and it also recommends that ATR is still relevant in the secularised world of today.

Keywords: ATR, God, Secularised, world, 21st century.

Introduction

A glance at the situation of things in our contemporary society portrays an era that has abandoned God. In modern society, religion is no longer as powerful as it used to be. Governments, schools, and daily life often operate without much talk about God. This paradigm shift is called secularization. On the other hand, even when religion seems less powerful, people do not stop asking the big questions, such as “What is life for?” “What is right and wrong?” “Is there something bigger than us?” In the midst of all these, the idea of God or the sacred has not disappeared, though one may talk of a change in our understanding of God.

The Nigerian society is not insulated from these changes. Here, African Traditional Religion (ATR), with its deep roots in the supreme being, ancestors, and spirits, exists alongside powerful religions such as Christianity and Islam. Also, modern life, with its focus on science, technology, and making money, still pushes forward. This is not a simple story of religion fading away, but rather a dicey situation where different beliefs adapt and compete. This creates an existential tension. This tension is more visible in the struggles of young people who are facing tough economic situations with high unemployment. Many of them feel intensely pressured to succeed



financially “by any means necessary”. This drive gave birth to the unpopular infamy “*okeite*”. This desperate scramble for survival and success forces hard choices about ethics and meaning, which often happens in a space where the old rules and spiritual warnings feel less immediate. There comes the question, what happens to God, the ancestors, or the sacred in this kind of world?

This article is an attempt to explore how ideas of the divine and the spiritual persist, transform, or get challenged in our increasingly secular age. Using insights from great scholars, we will examine this struggle, especially through the lens of young Nigerians fighting to survive. This will help us to understand that even when society seems focused only on the here and now, the search for something deeper, something sacred, never really goes away.

Manifestations Of Secularization in a Religiously Charged Context

Secularism has become a powerful concept in our contemporary society. It is the principle of separating religion from the political affairs of a state. In a secular society, laws and policies are made based on reason and universal principles, not religious doctrine. Also, individuals have the right to practice any religion or not to practice at all in a secular society. In the Nigerian context, we can observe seeming indices of secularism from the attitude and reaction of Nigerians to the existential situation. In the recent past, there has been a weakening influence of churches, mosques, and synagogues on public policy, education, and social norms. Also, though people believed, they do not want to belong to or be identified with any institutionalized religion. They practice a faith detached from traditional structures. Again, the pursuit of material possessions and status to feel the void of meaning and relevance has given rise to materialism as a new religion.

a. Institutional Shift and Decline

An objective observation of the Nigerian society will inform us that neither the big traditional churches, mosques, nor the African Traditional Religion (ATR) priesthoods tell governments, public square, or schools what to do anymore. Their absolute power to set rules for everyone has weakened; that is part of secularization (Casanova, 1994). The separation of church and state in France in 1905, which forced matters of faith into private spheres, epitomized this secularists’ drive. However, in the Nigerian context, matters of religion and faith have not vanished. Instead, as Berger (1999) would say, it is like a crowded marketplace. The presence of booming Pentecostal megachurches, vibrant Islamic reform movements, and ATR practices adapting to survive is a sign that religion has not vanished from Nigerian society. Rather, they are all competing to attract people’s attention and loyalty. Nweke (2019) opines that traditional institutions like the Igbo Ozo title (a prestigious leadership society) are figuring out how to stay relevant within modern politics and secular state structures, rather than operating outside them. Christianity and Islam are also constantly adapting their messages and methods to attract followers in this competitive environment, which impacts how ATR traditions respond (Nweke, 2020). It is not about religion disappearing; rather, it is about religions having to hustle harder and change their tactics to keep influence. The force of religion into private space gave birth to individual spirituality.



b. Rise of Individual Spirituality and Religious Syncretism.

In Africa, secularism arrived through colonialism, when communal ethics were replaced with Enlightenment individualism. As we know, secularism often gives people the opportunity to freely pick and choose what they believe. In such situations, people are less likely to accept everything one religion says just because they were born into it (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985). In Nigeria, this looks like “spiritual shopping”. Someone might be officially a Christian but also clandestinely consult an ATR healer for specific problems, or use protective charms alongside prayers. You even get blends like “Chrislam,” mixing elements of Christianity and Islam. People create their own personal spirituality, taking bits from different traditions that feel useful or meaningful to them (Nweke, 2025). Faith becomes more personal and less about strictly following the rules of one institution. This has a syncretic implication. As Berger (1967) noted, religion becomes a matter of personal choice in a pluralistic world, thus leading to this kind of syncretism. Also, as Nweke (2017) notes, this dethroned God and enthroned man, thereby eroding traditional restraints on greed and exploitation.

c. The Struggle and Tension Between Science/Technology and Religion for Dominance

One of the marks of a secular society is its great trust in science and technology; this is made more manifest in the life of the modern society, where scientific rationality has become the primary tool for explaining everything. In Nigeria, this confronts the strong traditions and powerful faith in healing from the religious background, either ATR, churches, or mosques. thereby creating real strife and confusion. Nweke (2025) relates a scenario of confusion whereby someone might go to a doctor for malaria (trusting science), but also visit a pastor for prayer against “spiritual attacks,” and consult a *dibia* in case of potential ancestral causes or for herbal remedies.

The point is that while the government and health systems operate on secular, scientific principles, many individuals operate with a mix of worldviews. They are not necessarily rejecting science or traditional/faith healing; rather, with a pragmatic spirit, they are trying everything that might work within a context where different explanations for illness and healing coexist, sometimes uneasily. This reflects what sociologists call the “coexistence of multiple rationalities” in secularizing societies (Giddens, 1991).

d. Consumerism and Materialism as New Idols

Unknown to most people, materialism is the most powerful force of secularism. In a tough economy like that of Nigeria, the pressure to get rich and show off success (big cars, fancy clothes, flashy parties) is too tempting. This idea, that wealth equals worth and is the ultimate sign of being “blessed”, can overshadow the teachings of any traditional religion, whether ATR, Christianity, or Islam (Nweke, 2025). Nowadays, churches preach “prosperity gospel,” which directly links faith to financial gain. Young people often measure success purely in terms of material possessions. By so doing, they sometimes bend or break traditional ethical rules to get it. As Daniel B. (1976) argued, consumer culture fosters a mindset where acquiring goods becomes



the central purpose of life, effectively replacing older religious goals. This “god of money” does not require a specific church; its altar is the marketplace, and its promise of “blessing” is material wealth. Oftentimes, this becomes the dominant force that shapes and informs people’s desires and decisions, thus transcending their formal religious affiliations. This worship of wealth and desire for fame has led some young people into the unholy act of “okeite”. We will elaborate that later.

THE QUEST FOR MEANING IN A PROFANE LANDSCAPE

In the midst of all these, man still searches for meaning. As Frankl (2006) would say “man’s ultimate motivational force is his search for meaning in life” (p. 99). But how should the contemporary Nigeria find purpose and meaning in life without overarching divine narrative? Should the ethical principles be based on humanism, cultural relativism and subjectivism or on divine command? Where do concept like reverence, awe, ultimate concern etc. find expression? Is it in nature, art, technology, or in the divine?

a. Secularization and Moral Fragmentation

In a highly secularizing society like Nigeria, the weakening of the religious influence has leveraged moral uncertainties. With the youth unemployment near 33.3% which affects 23 million young Nigerians, economic desperation often overrides traditional ethics, (Adeniji, 2024). With the decline in communal religious structure, survivalism replaces virtues like communal accountability. As Igboin, (2022) would argue Western secularism eroded the inherent "regard for life" (ubuntu) of Africa, where ethics were once rooted in ancestral reverence and collective welfare. The vacuum created fuels a shift toward pragmatic morality (survive by all means and at all cost). Economic despair drives youth toward gray-market activities, like exploitative trading or ritual crimes (Okeite). As ATR’s communal sanctions fade, utilitarianism ("what works") replaces sacred prohibitions. Also, rampant corruption especially among the leaders normalizes moral relativism. Youths, nowadays, see ethics as barriers in a system where wealth (God of Success) is worshipped over integrity

b. Spiritual Hunger in Secular Spaces

Despite institutional secularism, sacred impulses persist in everyday Nigerian life. This is what the theologian Rowan Williams calls a society “haunted by religion”. This has led to ritual adaptations. Roadside memorials for accident victims or Okeite pots (used in occult wealth rituals) re-purpose ancestral communion traditions. These acts reflect an unmet hunger for transcendence beyond materialism. This creates a paradox where God is erased from institutions, yet breathes in survival rituals and art. Unemployment fractures ethics, but sacred resilience emerges through “Hybrid Faith”. Youth attend church and consult *dibias*. This is a sign of the rejection of rigid binaries for fluid spirituality



The Crucible of Survival: Youth, Economics, and the “Oke-Itè” Mentality

Life for many young Nigerians feels like being trapped in a pressure cooker, and the relentless hustle to survive is not just about ambition; it is often born of raw necessity and a sense of desperation. It is the daily grind of trying to make money by any way possible, just to survive, to get ahead, or to meet crushing societal expectations of visible success, such as flashy cars, big houses. The driving force could be linked to brutal economic realities such as high unemployment, soaring prices (inflation), and few legitimate opportunities (Adebanwi, 2020). This is not just working hard; it is a fight for basic dignity and a future. This struggle has become a thing of concern because it happens in a world where the old rules and warnings do not hold the same power as before. Secularization and intense religious competition have significantly weakened the traditional anchors that once guided economic behavior

a. Okeite and the Struggle to make “Money by all Means”

“Okeite” is a derivative of two Igbo words which could literally be transliterated as “big pot” or great pot”. However, it refers to ritual charms promising wealth through supernatural means, like animal sacrifices or occult practices (Alisonomi, 2025). Historically, okeite were used for community protection and welfare, which was guided by strict Igbo ethics. While rooted in Igbo spirituality, modern misuse of Okeite, especially by the young generation (for example, in aiding crimes), distorts ancestral traditions and shows a departure from the core intentions of its institution. As Nweke (2025) notes, authentic African Traditional Religion (ATR) emphasizes community welfare, but economic despair has twisted rituals into desperate shortcuts.

As Nigeria’s youth unemployment (33.3%, affecting 23 million) creates a pressure cooker, the rising costs and scarce jobs force youth into survival mode. Even the education systems fail to prepare youth for market needs, thereby pushing them toward a spectrum of survival strategies. Some went into apprenticeship, gray zone activities like exploitative trading, Multi-Level Marketing (MLMs), betting, etc. Some others, as a result of the eroded ethics and state neglect, went into cybercrime (Yahoo Yahoo), Okeite, kidnapping, etc. Anambra State’s crackdown on *ndi dibia* (healers) aiding ritual crimes at the beginning of the year highlights the urgent need to resolve this crisis. Traditional structures like the “Igbo Ozo title system” (Nweke, 2019) or strong extended families (umunna) were not just social groups; they were enforcers of communal ethics and responsibility, providing support and shaming greedy or exploitative behaviours. The pressure to share wealth and act for the good of the group was immense.

However, modern life, led by individualism, and the sheer struggle to survive oneself have eroded these communal bonds and their ethical power (Nweke, 2017). It is even harder to think of the community when one is barely feeding oneself. The old ways of mutual obligation feel like a luxury many cannot afford. Similarly, secularism, which emphasizes individualism, also preaches a pragmatic ethical principle of “if it works and does not get you caught, it is okay.” It also brought about what Berger (1967) called “moral pluralism,” which makes it easier to justify bending rules. If one religion condemns an action but another seems silent, or if the secular world rewards it, the ethical lines are blurred. The youths are now left to wonder which rule is even the best to follow.



Nevertheless, in a world dominated by immediate, visible results (money, status, fame), belief in the invisible, future consequences from the spiritual beings weakens for many. The fear of earthly failure often outweighs the fear of distant spiritual repercussions. Similarly, when traditional paths to respect and honour (like Ozo titles) are harder or less valued, and when religious messages often emphasize material prosperity as God's favor (especially in Pentecostal "Prosperity Gospel"), wealth itself becomes the most visible sign of worth and divine blessing (Nweke, 2025). This creates immense pressure to appear successful, regardless of the means. "Blessing" is measured in Naira notes and flashy possessions, overshadowing virtues like honesty, community service, or patience taught by older traditions.

b. The role of Secularization

Nweke (2025) argues that Western secularism "bruised" the ethical frameworks of ATR, which invariably accelerates moral decline through:

Absence of Divine Sanction. This weakened the belief in spiritual consequences such as karma, judgment, hell, etc. This lowered the perceived cost of unethical actions focused solely on earthly gain. As Alisonomi (2025) notes, *Okeite* practitioners see deities as "bloodthirsty cannibals", which is a distortion of ATR's true communal ethics.

The God of Success. Material wealth and status became the primary measure of worth and divine blessing. Even Pastors preach more on the prosperity gospel, which fuels materialism and makes it a new idol in the secular world.

The Erosion of Communal Ethics. Our traditional religious communities often provided strong ethical structures and social safety nets. Such systems historically deterred exploitation. Their decline leaves youth isolated, allows them to prioritize self over community, and makes them vulnerable to purely pragmatic reasoning.

Short-Termism: one could link secularism to "temporal myopia," which focuses on immediate survival and gratification when rent or hunger threats overshadow long-term virtue and spiritual consequences.

God Reimagined: Responses to the Secular Condition

Secularism has generated some responses that have influenced the perception of God, especially among the younger generation. While some see God as uninvolved in our daily struggles, others focus on inner experience, mindfulness, or connection to nature. Some others invoke God only in moments of unexplainable wonders, or profound crises, etc.

1. The Silent God

Deism views God as a distant creator who designed the universe but remains uninvolved in daily human struggles. It is rooted in Enlightenment rationalism, rejects divine revelation, miracles and sacred texts, and asserts that God's existence is discernible only through nature and reason (EBSCO Research Starters, 2024). Philosophers like John Locke and Matthew Tindal



championed this “clockmaker God” metaphor. They argue that God established natural laws but does not intervene in human affairs (Britannica, 2025). In modern secular societies, Deism attracts those prioritizing science-spirituality compatibility. However, critics highlight its limitations. They argue that deism neglects divine immanence in African communal ethics, where God actively sustains life through ancestral bonds and communal accountability (Ujomudike, 2015).

2. The Immanent God

This perspective locates the divine within nature, humanity, and inner experience. Practices like mindfulness or nature rituals emphasize encountering God through present-moment awareness. Rowan Williams observes that such spirituality counters secular alienation by affirming "the whole earth is full of God's glory" (Isaiah 6:3). The allusion here is that sacredness permeates daily life (Williams, 2009). However, critics like Thoman (2021) caution that overemphasizing immanence risks reducing God to psychological comfort, thereby neglecting the transcendental nature of God.

3. The God of the Gaps

Here, people invoke God only to explain phenomena science cannot resolve, such as suffering or cosmic origins. The term emerged in the 19th century, with thinkers like Henry Drummond dismissing it as "stopgap theology" that diminishes as science advances (Britannica, n.d.). Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned that such a God retreats with human progress, urging faith grounded in tangible reality (Bonhoeffer, 1953). The economic despair in Nigeria has led some youth to seek God as a crisis-intervener for quick wealth, thereby resorting to okeite ritual. Nweke (2025) warns that such is a distortion of the African holistic divine view of the universe.

4. The Political God

Here, religion merges with nationalist or social justice agendas. Pew Research (2025) identifies this as "religious nationalism," where dominant faiths shape national identity. While this may encourage communal solidarity, it carries the risks of marginalization of minority religions and using God to legitimize state violence (Bonhoeffer, 1953).

5. The Rejection

This is championed by Atheism and Agnosticism. While Atheism denies God's existence, agnosticism deems God unknowable. Both stem from the claim of scientific materialism that natural laws explain reality without divine agency (EBSCO, 2024). In secularized societies like Sweden, this emphasizes empirical evidence over faith. Yet theologians note that rejection often targets institutional religion's abuses, not spirituality itself. The Nigerian youth may reject Christianity but express faith in God and spiritual beings through ancestral reverence or rituals like *Okeite*.



The Enduring Longing

In the midst of all these, there is this innate drive in man for meaning, hope, moral grounding, and connection. Can humanism, science and technology, art, etc., fully satisfy these longings?

a. Persistent Human Needs

Secularization has not eradicated the quest for meaning, connection, and moral grounding in man.

Robert Coles (2013) observes that even in secular societies, individuals experience “sacred moments” in everyday acts of compassion or communal solidarity (p. 24). This reflects an “inarticulate ache” for the divine, and re-echoes Augustine’s assertion that humans remain “restless” until finding fulfillment beyond material existence. “O Lord, you made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

The economic situation in Nigeria increases this longing. Abraham Maslow’s expanded “hierarchy of needs” identifies self-transcendence as the highest human need (1971, p. 269). He placed altruism or spiritual unity beyond the self. Nigerian youth, facing 33.3% unemployment (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), turn to Okeite not merely for wealth but to fill existential voids. This is a manifestation of Maslow’s finding that transcendence needs persist amid scarcity.

b. Secular Surrogates

Secular surrogates refer to non-religious systems, beliefs, practices, or institutions that take the place of religion in providing functions that religion traditionally fulfilled. The modern society has made attempts to present science and technology, arts, humanism, etc., as substitutes to fill the vacuum left by the declining religious influence. These new paradigms attempt to provide a moral compass, human fulfillment, and search for meaning without appealing to the divine. However, their limitations in full satisfaction of human needs remain evident.

Art: Art is used to express spiritual or sacred feelings without relying on organized religion. Wagner (1851) believed that art keeps the emotional and mythical part of religion alive. In Nigeria, popular afrobeat musicians use Yoruba “orisha” spiritual symbols in their songs to inspire pride and spiritual resistance (Olorunyomi, 2020, p. 112). However, art is often taken over by capitalism. Instead of being sacred, it becomes a way of making money. Ugochukwu (2023) cries out that the Igbo sacred “ikenga” statues are now used in expensive advertisements, which degrades their deeper meaning.

Science and Philosophy: These two have helped us to understand how the world works. Historical evidences have shown that they are not opposed to faith. Though these help to explain nature, they struggle with the deepest questions of life (why do we suffer, what is the purpose of life). Many young people in Nigeria have seen that science and education cannot fix the problem of unemployment and poverty. This led them to seek spiritual alternatives, sometimes even in disdainful ritual manners such as okeite (Nweke, 2025). Also, Slife (2022) notes that the roles of faith in the lives of people are being ignored in the modern academic environment, where spiritual beliefs are often rejected as being biased.



Community and Vocation: Luther believed that ordinary work could be a way of serving God (Wingren, 2004). Even today, ideas like “Business as Mission” encourage people to see entrepreneurship as a spiritual calling (Baer, 2018, p. 93). In order to discourage involvement in scams and cybercrimes among the Nigerian youths, the Catholic programs were developed, which encouraged the youths to see honest work as part of their spiritual vocation (Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 2023, p. 7). But not all works are valued equally. Some jobs are seen as more sacred than others. This reinforces a false division between secular life and spiritual life (Baer, 2018, p. 101).

In sum, secular surrogates cannot fully meet the deep human need for transcendence, moral grounding, or spiritual hope.

The Paradox

The precarious economic situation in Nigeria reveals a paradoxical truth that material lack increases spiritual longing. Roadside memorials for accident victims or EndSARS protest sites become impromptu shrines, merging dissent with ancestral reverence (Ojo, 2021, p. 44). These acts, as Coles (2013) notes, are “sacred moments” in a profane landscape (p. 31).

Similarly, Okeite exposes dual realities of distortion and resilience. Distortion in the sense that wealth rituals reduce spirituality to transactional magic (Nweke, 2025, p. 36). Resilience in the sense that hybrid faith (e.g., consulting “*dibias*” alongside church attendance) signifies adaptive transcendence (Ngobili, 2022, p. 12). This paradox affirms Abraham Kuyper’s (1880) maxim: “There is not a square inch [of existence] over which Christ does not cry, ‘Mine!’” (p. 27). This means that even in ordinary or broken parts of life, the sacred remains present. The human longing for transcendence is resilient, even in hardship.

Summary

The Nigerian society is experiencing secularization. However, this is not the end of religion, but a situation where religion competes with science and materialism. The changes brought about by this scenario could be seen in the decline of religious influence and power, in its struggle to compete and adapt. It could also be seen in the spiritual shopping (blending of beliefs) among the people for practical help.

In contemporary society, materialism has become a dominant “god,” where wealth equals worth and divine blessing. People, especially the youth, want to be wealthy by all means, but the economic situation is harsh. Their desperation, combined with weakened moral foundations (eroded community shame, clashing religious ethics, fading fear of spiritual consequences), pushes some towards unethical means of survival (scams, crime). This has generated some religious responses like syncretism, where people mix religious beliefs pragmatically; for some, God is only invoked in crises. Similarly, atheism/agnosticism emerges as a response to religious failure or corruption.



However, the human Longing still endures. Humans still crave meaning, belonging, and moral grounding beyond materialism. All religions face the challenge. The big question is, can they offer robust ethical communities that can counter the corrosive “by any means” survival pressure? Paradoxically, flashes of transcendence, community, and struggle for justice show that the sacred impulse persists.

Conclusion

Even though we live in a secular age where religion seems to be pushed aside, God has not been eradicated; our conception of God has changed. God is no longer seen in religious institutions but in everyday struggles. People’s belief in God is made more visible in the desperate cries of Okeite practitioners, in the songs of Afrobeats artists, and in the quiet actions of people struggling for survival. Taking the Nigerian youth, for example, with an over 33% unemployment rate, many are just trying to make ends meet. Consequent upon this, some go into genuine works, others fall into dangerous paths like ritual crimes. This is a manifestation of the effect of secularism on our value system. Communal ethics are breaking down, wealth is deified, and people pursue quick success without thinking of the long-term consequences.

However, religion and God refuse to die. As Nweke would argue, African Traditional Religion remains a “living root” under the concretes of modernity, its communal ethics offering antidotes to isolation and exploitation and corruption. When churches revive skill training for the young, or with the introduction of cultural symbols in our music (Afrobeat), they are helping to bring back the sense of sacredness in society. Rowan Williams thought rings true that the secular society is haunted by the ghost of the sacred they tried to bury. This means that even if people stop going to church, they still long for something deeper and spiritual. The three important takeaways for the secular age are communal ethics over individualism, sacred integration of tradition and modernity, and making good policies that respect culture.

Finally, we do not need to go back to the medieval era of theocracy, but attention should be paid to the cracks in society, those places where people are still searching for meaning. Even when they seem far from religion, deep inside, many still long for something sacred. For Nweke (2025), we must develop a theology that affirms the individual, not as an isolated atom, but as a knot in a net of sacred relations. Let us find God in the broken places and rebuild our values from there.

Recommendation

Religious Institutions (ATR, Christian, Muslim) should move beyond prosperity-driven narratives and develop theologies and practices that offer meaning, dignity, and ethical guidance independent of material wealth. Also, they should build supportive communities that provide tangible solidarity and mutual aid. This will counter isolation and desperation, and strengthen youth engagement.

Communities & Cultural Leaders should support initiatives that strengthen positive communal bonds and revive mechanisms for promoting shared responsibility and ethical conduct (e.g., revitalising positive aspects of Ozo or age-grade systems for mentorship). They should also



create platforms and support networks that celebrate and encourage ethical entrepreneurship, skill acquisition, and legitimate hustling.

Government and Policymakers should implement serious policies that tackle youth unemployment, inequality, and lack of opportunity, which are the primary fuel for the destructive “by any means” mentalities. Again, they strengthen education that promotes ethical reasoning, critical thinking about worldviews (religious and secular), and media literacy. This will help the youths to navigate complex moral landscapes.

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