

THE RELIGION AND SECULARIZATION DEBATE: A PROPOSED FUSION FOR SOCIAL ADVANCEMENTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Man, especially the African, has been described as being incurably religious. The expressions and intensity of man's religious flavours have been both historical and legendary. But of late religion has become a suspect standing trial in the court of public suspicion and potential rejection, thereby warranting the view that religion should be expunged from public space. In this paper both sides of the coin have been viewed. The paper proposes that a fusion of religion and society rather than secularization of society should be the way forward for Nigerian society.

Introduction

In recent times the conflict in relationship which religion impacts and is impacted by the society has drawn so much curiosity and increasing questions that are yet to be convincingly, and perhaps, conclusively answered. From about the 19th to 20th centuries religion has increasingly become a subject of heated intellectual discourse, so much so that there have been theoretical disputes about the meaning, place and role or function of religion in a sophisticatedly advancing human society.

In historical terms, the alterations in the social structure of the society have been occasioned by a variety of factors. Among are:

- ✓ The industrial revolution of Europe and America
- ✓ The attendant non-political structures/patterns of emerging modern societies.
- ✓ Growth of intellectualism
- ✓ Emergence of new ideologies like humanism, religious conservatism, radicalization and extremism ideologies.
- ✓ The rise of economics and economy as critical social factor
- ✓ Advancements in science and technology as being increasingly significant to enhancing solutions to human problems and comfort, and
- ✓ The failure of religious practitioners and their leaders to sustainably live out their sermons in character and usefulness to solving social problems. There is growing concern if not worries to re-examine critically, and suggestively too, the relationship and place of religion in the emerging social realities of present day human community.

The itemization in the paragraph above can be termed as the social change factor. Hence the question of religion and secularization is to be explained in terms of the interactive

relationship between religion and social change and vice versa.

This work is simple contributory continuation of the debate about secularization in our social understandings of religion. For, indeed, from some intellectually meaningful sources there has been same theoretical “prophesies” or predictions about the “demise of religion” and the rise of human intellect or humanism. Hamilton (2001:185). Writes:

Taylor, Frazer, Marx and Freud expected religion to Fade away as science dominate the contemporary society.

He writes further of:

The disappearance of religion in the familiar and traditional form to be replaced by something based upon non-supernaturalistic and non-transcendental foundations. August Comete invented a new religion (alternative religion) based upon the rational and scientific formulations of the new science of sociology to fill the vacuum of traditional supernaturalistic religion).

This kind of thinking has given vent to the idea of secularization which is here interpreted to imply the nomenclature called alternative religion or alternative to religion

Conceptualization of key terms

Religion: The problematic of definitions or meanings of concepts are largely commonplace in academic discourse. This is so because perspectives and background intellectual orientations of scholars vary. That being the case, notwithstanding, religion is here viewed in its transcendental, metaphysical and supernaturalistic form on the one hand, and in terms of its sociological identity on the other. Intellectuals and theorist like Edward Caird, E. B. Taylor, Malinoski, Marx, etc view the meaning of religion differently. While it is best to explain its meaning in terms of its unique traditional and functional characteristic namely: that religion features beliefs, rites and rituals, doctrines, worship experience, deity/deities (supernaturalism) social relations, (groups) etc some definitional views will be sampled.

Religion according to Emile Durkheim is “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things set apart and forbidden, which unite into one single community ...”. Adekoya in Ekpo (199:20) has also presented more definitional conceptions of religion by some sociological academic giants. According to him,

Marx Muller sees religion as “perception of the infinite”. For Immanuel Kant religion is the recognition of duties as Divine commands. That is to say religion is a duty which arises out of our beliefs and moral duty towards God. E. M. Rogers sees Religion as a belief in the supernatural power which provides morality and give answers to life's question. To Karl Marx, religion is “opium of the people”, that is, it is a psycho-social hypnotism, a psychological spell for controlling the people.

As earlier opined, religion can at best be defined through reference to its composite features, characteristics or qualities which include worship, rituals, ethos, doctrine or philosophy, values, sacrifice, attitudes to life and spiritual destiny, etc.

By its nomenclature religion derives from the Latin word “religion” or “religare” with the meanings “to link, join, connect. bind, etc. In this case, religion links man with his spiritual essence (Idowu (1973).

The importance/significance of religion

Religion is as important to man as his very existence, and it possesses a self-same significance for man's society. Any attempt to think of a "religionless" society is an attempt to imagine a society without a soul or spirit, a guiding conscience, ethical norms, indeed a society that negate its own essence.

Bouquet (1945) had rightly said that "religion cannot be wisely or safely ignored or neglected". The multiple influence or effects of religions on man and society are evident in human laws and legal systems, war and peace institutions academics and government, etc. It has become a factor in national integration and peace. The impact of the Islamic religious sect in Niger (Boko haram) on the social environment, the people, agricultural activities/productivity, internally displaced persons (IDP), as well as the religion-based difference between the Sunnis and the Shittes in the Muslim world of the Middle East which has severally and protractedly resulted in wars, loss of lives and currently ongoing mass migration to Europe are strong pointers of the significance of religion in our world today.

To deny religion is to deny the composition of man, namely; that he is body, soul and spirit; and also to deny his nature, namely; that "man is incurably religious" as expressed by Mbiti (1970).

Again the sociological significance of religion cannot be denied. Religion is historically and currently a critical factor to society in terms of its; (a) functionality (positive roles) on the one hand Dys-functionality (negative effects) on the other.

In terms of its positive roles Thomas (1980) has discussed the functions of religion to include the following:

- ✓ That religion provides support, consolation and reconciliation to man
- ✓ Gives man assurance of security and feeling of confidence in the face of uncertainties and impossibilities.
- ✓ Gives sacred backings or support to the customs, norms and values, thus serving as moral compass to man
- ✓ Religion provide standard of values, norms and rules for society
- ✓ It help man to identify himself in alignment with supernatural essence..

On the reverse, religion is also dysfunctional to society as it has led to social conflicts, wars, misconceptions, misunderstanding and misapplications, extremism, social marginalization/exclusiveness, genocide, insecurity, political tension. Etc.

Secularization

The word secularization arises from the verb "secularize" or "secularizing.

It implies:

- ✓ he separation of society from the religious or spiritual connection or influence or to make society to become worldly or unspiritual or,
- ✓ To imbue with secularism (see. www.dictionary.com). It equally implies.
- ✓ To change clergy from regular traditional duties to secular or
- ✓ To transfer e.g. property ownership, central from ecclesiastical to civil possession or use.

Specifically, secularization is a process in which religion, through sociological

developments in society, loses its social and cultural influence. As a result of secularization the role of religion in modern societies becomes restricted to its core traditional roles. Some characteristics of secularize societies are;

- ✓ Faith religion lacks cultural social authority,
- ✓ Religions organizations or religions leadership have little or no social power
- ✓ Public life is run without reference to the supernatural entities or channels.

(a) Background views that Justify Secularization

Secularization of society has arisen due to a number of factors that have culminated into social change, and today has a growing effect on religion itself.

Secularization as an emerging social phenomenon is an off-shoot of the intellectual studies and attempted theoretical interpretations of religion. Emile Durkheim, Hubert Spencer, Karl Max and even Sigmund Freud, among other theorist, have attempted to separately and differently interpret the inter-woven relationship or influence between religion and society. For Freud, religion was so powerful that it was a “neurotic obsession” and an “infantile Folluosis” that kept man from self-realization, self-determination and self-actualization. Freud argued that man (society) needed to be liberated from religion which limited rather than expressed the prowess of humanity. Max held that religion was an “opium” which hynothised, if not bewitched, the natural, simple and common sensibility of man. He argued that religion was “exploitative” and “oppressive”, serving interest of the bourgeoisie or capitalists few.

For Durkheim, religion defined social bonds of the community or society. It had “totemic” definitions for/of society.

These scholars respectively suggested or perhaps predicted the elimination or separation of religion from it societal influence. Although their studies were carried out in primitive historic- anthropological settings, their conclusion and scholarly suggestions have continued to find predictive relevance and fulfilments in the fertile grounds of modern-day societal dynamics namely: social change, economic realities, political up-heavels, conflicts and wars. insecurity and terrorism, etc.

Indeed the need for secularization has been echoed and amplified by the inability of religion (i.e faith and supernaturalism) to proffer adequate and sustainable solutions to the problems of human social existence. The emergence of new subject-matters like alternative to religion, liberation theology, for instance, are consequential from the idea of secularization.

Some Essential Connotation of Secularization

Jose Casanova, in his article (Rethinking secularization: a global comparative perspective) published on nct, has mention three dimension or connection or perception of secularization;

1. That, secularization is the declined of religious beliefs and practices in modern society. This view is the most recent and most mind wide spread perception and usage of the term in contemporary academic debate on secularization
2. That, secularization is the privatization of religion from public influence to private observance. This is generally understood as a modern historical trend arising out of contemporary modernization currents in society. In this context secularization

- becomes a normative condition for religions practice observance, a pre-condition needful for free practice of modern liberal democratic politics.
3. That, secularization is the differentiation of the **secular spheres** of society (namely; state, economy, science, law and legislation, **social hierarchy** of power and control). In this sense, secularization is understood in terms of **emancipation** of society from dominance or control of religious institutions or its norms. This context is the core component of the classic secularization theory. Here **secularization** expresses the “transfer of persons, things, meanings, etc, from ecclesiastical or religions to civil or lay use, possession, or control” (Casanova, 2015”).

We may sum up that secularization is both a process and event, while **secularism** is an ideology.

The rise of secularization: Factors that fuelled arguments for secularization in contemporary Nigeria society.

1. The theory of secularization is both an emerging and ongoing **academic debate**. There are some current and historical forces that have become **increasingly antagonistic** to organized or established religions like the **monotheistic religion** of Islam and Christianity. Vexen Crabtree (2011) has classified them into **two namely**: (1) **Anti-religious forces** of the present era which he outlined to include: **materialism**, religious compartmentalization, religious individualism (i.e, that religion is a private and not public affair), multi-culturalism, science, growth of human intelligence and intellectualism, human rights, advances in technology e.g. internet, etc; and
2. The **anti-religious forces of history**, namely: **Christian intolerance of other forms of religions or religious practices**, communism, historical figures (**people of historical importance**, the rise of intellectual movements in history championed by Fredric Nietzsche, Marx Weber, Freud and Karl Max), etc.
An elaborate discussion of the factors that fuel secularization is **constrained** by limits of space in this paper (Reference to www.vexen.co.uk is suggested for further details).
3. **Historical dynamic of Europe**” this is one of the factors that warranted and ventilated secularization. Historically the **Western European dynamic** of secularization became globalized with the expansion of **European Colonialism** (and with the ensuring global expansion of capitalism) of the **European system of states** which involved modern science, modern ideology of **secularism**, emerging new fronts of modern social problems like **slave trade**, **population expansion**, advances in technology, etc., the modern idea of **secularism** emerged as a history – induced ideology occasion by the inevitability of **social change**.
4. **Need for balance of religious influence in the global social space** also fed the idea of secularization. Christianity seemed to have religious dominance in Europe, America and other new frontiers of global empires within colonial expansion brought or triggered questions how less dominant religious like Taoism, Confucianism and other world religion could find expression in response to the global expansion of Western secular modernity. The need for a level playing field for all religious traditions are re-interpreted, as a response to this historical global challenge was

equally instrumental to the development of secularization.

Claims and counter-claims in the debate on Religion and secularization

Grossel, J. (2015) has summarily captured typical argumentative views of the opposing propositions of religion and secularism. In his words "the secular accuse the religious" and "the religions accuse the secular". This debate is briefly outlined in propositional statements of claims of both the secularist and anti-secularist.

The secularist view points: They argue that religion and religionists want to impose their beliefs on the rest of society. They hold that religions establishment is as corrupt as any other social sector of society. For the secularist, religionists are all about money, sex and power; they are too many failures in and by the religious; the religious are hypocrites, they show serious lack of proper moral accountability, with long hidden scandals of sexual abuses and lust for social power or control.

The anti-secularist (all religions) view-points: They argue that the secularist have no morals of their own, no standards and no values. Without God, church synagogues, Mosque they are like lost sheep or a lost world. If left to their own notion of right and wrong, the society itself gets entangled in its own moral lack or moral sturdiness

Any end in sight? The possibility of resolving the debate is elusive. Just as there are many religiously observant people who are also living by rote, so are there many secular people living aimless unreflecting lives, and vice versa. Religiosity or non religiosity is no criteria for fulfilling human social existence. It is the proper application of the social, religious, human, intellectual and all other resources available to us that counts more.

Is secularization not anti-Christianity

Is secularization possible? Is it feasible? Can it be achieved? These are deep questions that beg for satisfying answers. Indeed these questions open the lid to the dilemma of religion and secularization. The concept of secularization seems to be a direct affront on Christianity which has been common in many Western societies in historical terms. The history and role of Christianity coupled with the historical shifts in Christian social influence in society, as well as the industrial revolutions in Europe and America which set the stage or pace for modernization (and its attendant dynamics) all cumulated to betray Christianity to the world and society Christianity was supposed to serve as spiritual and moral guide.

The external social forces antagonizing the church from without as well as the internal schism biting from within throughout the ages of Christian history did not help the continued survival of the influence of the church in the public place.

The idea of secularization betrays and portrays a direct and indirect, subtle and forceful, calculated and incidental assault on the place previously enjoyed by religion, specially Christianity in society. It has stimulated the thinking that secularization is intended to dislodge the influence of Christian ideologies, ideals and value system in the social public space.

Reflutions

Religion and Secularization: a recommendation propositions for social fusion

The possibility of secularization in its full context is hardly achievable. This expression is hinged on a number of factors.

1. Human nature: Secularization is (or will be) a negation of the inter-woven composition of human nature as comprising spirit, soul and body; a negation that denies the very essence of the human being namely; his spirit and souls, which only the religion can cater for. Religion remains the soul and spirit of society. A society that separates itself from religion is a society without its spirit or soul. Secularization at the very must should be partial or liberal or what this writer calls conjunctive secularization. Here I refer to a cooperative constructive partnership between religion and secularization for the common ultimate benefit of society.
2. The religious and the secular are inextricably bound together and mutuality condition each other (Asad 2003:191). This being the case, the secular should not be thought of as the state in which real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of religion. For, as Asad points, "the secular was part of the theological discourse at on time in history while at later times the religious is constituted by secular political and scientific discourse, giving new functional definition and meanings to the religious.
Hence, the religious in its current connotation is product of historical evolutions of intellectualism, rationalism and scientific process in society. Religion is now (in its contemporary perception) a universal globalized concept that has emerged as a reconstruction of Western secular modernity.
3. A proper or rather pure conception of secularization will require a critical examination of the diverse patterns of differences and fusion of the religious and the secular as well as their mutual constitution across all world religion; and not just Christianity per se, or the exclusion of other religions as Islam. Confucianism, Taoism, some of which project secular ideology as their religious theories.
4. The secularization preposition bears anti-Christianity bus
Having only one category of religion (Christianity) emphasized for the secularization debate naturally leaves a skewed picture on the scale, and could hardly be enough to represent all other religions in the secularization thesis, more so because of the differences in religious philosophy, doctrine, practices, population and spread in the world. Besides, one category or version of secularization cannot be sufficient to be applicable (for instance) to such religious as Confucianism, in so far as this type of religious transcendence differs from traditional religious supernaturalism with concepts of (God/gods) on the one hand, and which have no ecclesiastical organization similar to Christianity or Islam or Judaism on the other.
5. Religious and secular systems should co-exist as they are complimentary one of the other and vice versa. The nature of man and his society places demand for religious usefulness at one time and secular orientation at another. The world itself is variety, with inter-changing or evolving times, seasons and social orientations. The society and its secular systems needs religious for the enforcement of the true meaning,

value and spiritual essence of the life of society's members, just as religion does not operate in vacuum but needs society to function.

Conclusion

The relationship between religion and society cannot be disputed. Both are inter-dependent, inseparable and indispensable because the moral component of man, society and laws of society carry the ethical authority of religion. Moreover, man is naturally religious, this being so because of man's spirit and soul. Attempts to separate religion from society are and can become a dislodgement, dislocation and negation of the very essence of man, namely religion.

The imperfection of religious practitioners should not be taken as the imperfection of religion itself. Consequently, as is the case with other social institution in the Nigeria society including the polity, politics, government, governance, family, Education, Economy; Religion should be seen as a social partner in conjunction with other social institutions for a better society. Religion should not be condemned to the abyss of oblivion.

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