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Secularization and Development in Africa: A Terrific Façade

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Abstract- This article highlights secularization debate; identifying its major variants; critiquing the idea with particular reference to Peter Berger's rendition; and presenting his recent position on the debate. The paper then provides a snapshot of development from the Western perspective, examining the relationship between religion and development, showing how it differs from an African perspective. The paper argues that,the Western models of development are not compatible with Africa because they are alien, incompatible with the norms and values of most Africans, and notably, neglect or relegate several important aspects of the people's culture, including the role of religion in development.Thus, when African leaders embrace and applaud the Western-based idea of secularized development at the expense of the subalterns, who do not feel the impacts of these superficial developments, it becomes a terrific façade. The article concludes by proposing a bottom-up approach to development conception and implementation in non-Western society, notably Africa, asserting that it has to beconsidered as a process compatible with the people's realities, reflecting their values, including religion and culture generally.

Keywords: *religion, development, secularization, peter berger, façade, ideas, practices.*

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Secularization and Development in Africa: A Terrific Façade

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I. Introduction

This essay is divided into two main sections. The first section presents arguments on European[1] sociologists' conviction about the increasing secularization of "modern" society, drawing from the ideas of Peter Berger and Max Weber. The paper then reviews and critiques some of the contemporary postulates on the debate. The second section of the paper presents discussion on the nature of religion and economic development, examining how Western development models fail to work in Africa[2], and proposing a bottom-up approach that is compatible with the realities of the people, reflecting their values.

II. Increasing Secularization of "Modern" Society

Secularization is one of the main themes in sociology of religion. The terms of the current anthropological literatureon secularism are set in relation to both classic and recent developments in secularization theory (Cannell, 2010:86). As with most concepts in the social sciences, there is no single or widely accepted definition of secularization. There is, first of all, disagreement about its locus. Some definitions[3] emphasize individual beliefs and practices, others the influence of religious norms, and elites, and still others the differentiation of religious and nonreligious spheres or institutions (Gorski and Altinordu, 2008:57).In*The Sacred Canopy*(1967) Berger first deals with his theory or conception on the nature of religion. He argues that humans are biologically fated to "exteriorize" and fill their world with meaning, that is create a culture, which is then "interiorized" by a process of socialization. Often, this leads to "alienation[4]", since humans start to regard products of their own activity as natural, unchanging and external objects that are "out there"(1967:2). Berger introduces the notion of "plausibility," structure- a conversation by which this particular reality[5] works, asserting that whenever the conversation stops, the world starts to shake.

Culture[6] and society are rooted in man's biological nature. Society structures, distributes, coordinates, and provides the infrastructure for the world-building activities of man. Society is a necessary condition for culture because "only in society can the products of those activities persist over time" (p.7). Berger asserts that religion itself has been probably the most powerful agency of alienation because religion has been a very important form of false consciousness (1967:87).It is worthy to note that Berger's ideas on secularization stem from Weber, and is therefore an

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[1] The roots of the secularization idea can be traced to European scholars, but the later proponents are not necessarily Europeans.

[2] It is worthy to acknowledge that Africa is a huge continent with diversities and differences even within sub-regions and individual countries. This is not to generalize and say that all African societies are the same or should follow the same patterns of development.

[3] Berger subscribes to the modernization definition. He defines the term as a process in which religion diminishes in importance both in society and in the consciousness of individual secularization is the direct result of modernization (2001: 443).

[4] He borrows the idea from Marx

[5] Social construction (externalization, objectivation, internalization)

[6] Berger refers culture to the totality of man's externalized products and the term "society' to refer to the specific social arrangements upon which culture rests (1967: 6).

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extension of Weber's analysis of the"secularizing[7]" function of Protestantism. Let me briefly recount Weber's idea on secularization.

When Max Weber designates as secularization the process whereby the concept of "calling" moves or is relocated from the religious to the secular sphere to signify, now for the first time, the exercise of secular activities[8] in the world, he is using as analogy the canonical meaning of the concept (Casanova, 1994:13). Similarly, Hughey (1979) argues that, with reference to Max Weber's work, secularization[9] may refer to very different phenomena in different situations, depending on the content and specific sociohistorical context which it occurs(90). Rationalization, with particular reference to religious intellectuals can be used to illustrate that. The process of intellectual rationalization results in a systematization of religious values in terms of their own autonomous and internal logic. At the same time, secular sphere of value (political, economic, kinship, military, aesthetic, intellectual, etc.) undergo the same process of intellectual rationalization and how they are organized into logical systems based on their own immanent laws. The further the rationalization and sublimation of the external and internal possessions of- in the widest sense- 'things worldly' has progressed, the stronger has the tension on the part of religion become (Weber 2011). Thus, the more intellectual rationalization proceeds toward systematizing each institutional order in terms of its logic and values, the more the internal logic of each sphere can be seen to conflict with that of every other sphere.

Peter Berger in his *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) defines secularization as "the process by which sectors of the society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols". Additionally, he sees secularization as empirically available "processes" of great importance in "modern Western[10] history" (1967:107). To explain modernity, Berger contends that secularization operates in dialectical tension with "pluralism.[11]" Berger uses pluralism as a key part of his discussion of how religion has changed from its previous roles in human culture. The plausibility of all religious systems become undermined when encountered with competing belief systems, consequently producing a "crisis of legitimation" for organized religion. Along with this crisis is competition among religious groups with "the same legal status" but pits these groups against "*non*-religious rivals in the business of defining the world" (1967:137). Against this background, Berger concludes that Pluralism is particularly detrimental to "religious ex-monopolies" (1967:137). On the effect of secular society on religion, Berger asserts that it represents a severe rupture of the traditional task of religion, which was precisely the establishment of an integrated set of definitions of reality that could serve as a common universe of meaning for the members of society (1967; 134). Couple of decades later, Berger changed his mind and debunked his theory. The next section reviews some critiques of the secularization theory.

III. Secularization: A Critique

In *The Desecularization of the World,* Peter Berger(1999) identified mistakes in his theory andrefuted his claims that "modern" society would become increasingly secularized. "My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false" (1999: 2) he declared. The world today, he further argues, "with some exceptions to which I will come presently, is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever" (1999:2). But even before that, his ideas and theory were challenged. On decline of religious beliefs, Berger (1999) surveys the contemporary world scene and found little evidence of religious decline, except on some American university campuses and perhaps in Western Europe. Again, it was apparent to him that modernization has had some secularizing effects, more in some places than others. But it has also provoked powerful movements of "counter-secularization" (1999:3). In fact, secularization operates at different levels- for instance societal level secularization is not necessarily linked to secularization on the level of individual consciousness. James Beckford (2003) provides a detailed analysis of clusters of ideas about secularization. These are: *differentiation, rationalization, modernization, metamorphoses, continuing vitality, and universality of religion*.

Stark (1999) argued that secularization certainly seemed to have slowed or even stopped, asserting that it had never happened, urging for expunging the term from the sociological lexicon. He based his arguments on a number of events that disproved the secularization apologists' claims. These include the Iranian Revolution, the rapid spread of Pentecostalism in the global South, communal violence in Southern Asia, the collapse of communism qua secular religion, etc. Another dimension of attack on the secularization thesis is looking at it from the privatization of religion angle. Jose Casanova (1994) questioned this, utilizing empirical data within the United States and other continents including Africa. He concludes that we are witnessing the "deprivatization[12]" of religion in the modern world,

[7] Weber did not seem to use the term secularization but instead disenchantment, which could mean secularization
[8] Secularization of religious motives
[9] Disenchantment of the world
[10] He justifies modernWestern based on its roots in the religious tradition (Berger, 1967:124).
[11] A social-structural correlate of the secularization of consciousness (Berger 1967:127)

[12] By deprivatization I mean the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization reserved for them (Casanova 1994:5)

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citing examples with social movements that have appeared which were either religious in nature or challenging in the name of religion for legitimacy and autonomy of the primary secular spheres, the state and the market economy. More so, "religious institutions and organizations refused to restrict themselves to the pastoral care of individual souls" and continue to raise questions about the interconnections of private and public morality and "to challenge the claims of the subsystems, particularly states and markets, to be exempt from extraneous normative considerations" (Casanova 1994:5).

Chaves (1994) puts forward another puzzle by shifting emphasis on the secularization debate from a supraindividual level to the power of ecclesiastical elites and institutions. He argues that secularization is most productively understood not as declining religion, but as the declining scope of religious authority. Strikingly, Warner (2002) came up with some data that proved particular social and institutional conditions in the U.S.A. which made its religious scene distinctively different from Europe's. Thus, secularization theories based on the European canon are no particularly useful for understanding religion here. This point further validates the fallacy of Berger (1967) that makes bolder claims that his model applies to all religions. Another important stride in critiquing the secularization debate is Berger's (2001) reflection that he was wrong when he had thought that, modernization necessarily meant secularization. He further traces the source of his idea to an interpretation that was eloquently expressed in Weber's phrase of "the disenchantment of the world" (2001:443).

James Beckford (2003) considers the idea of secularization with reference to the metamorphoses[13] idea as "deceptive" (2003:52). He then cites David Lyon who asserts that 'the idea of secularization, if taken to refer beyond institutional religiosity to the attenuation of all forms of faith, spirituality, and belief, is plainly mistaken' (2000:x). To buttress this point, David Lyon refers to Robert Bellah's works since the 1960s, insisting that it is no longer possible to divide mankind into a binary of believers and non-believers. Rather, all believe something.

From the above, we can appreciate the role of religion and religious ideas in "modern" society. If Berger's secularization idea was extending the works of Weber and perhaps Durkheim, one needs to ask if the *Sacred Canopy* ever existed in the first place because we have to be critical of the contexts – the times and processes (events). What led to Weber and Durkheim's mode of thoughts? Both of these classical scholars were noticing industrialization and modernization happening in their own societies at those periods. It was an established fact that there was "disenchantment of the world" in Weber's case, which was linked to the idea of economic development, although, he was not saying in explicit terms that there was secularization. If Berger missed the point[14], then what was he not noticing?

There are many variants of secularization with emphasis on various aspects. I have highlighted six:differentiation, rationalization, modernization, metamorphoses, continuing vitality, and universality of religion. Peter Berger's "favorite" was the modernization, which assumes that modernization means the decline of religion and the institutional order and then the consciousness of individual. These ideas have been challenged by scholars including Berger himself, a leading proponent of the theory. As Casanova (1994) asserts, and he is right, there are two take-homes: religion has come to stay, thus putting to rest one of the cherished dreams of the Enlightenment. Second, religion shall continue to play important public roles in the ongoing construction of the modern world. Empirical data across continents and the U.S. dispute the secularization idea. Modernity does not necessarily lead to secularization, but pluralism. Although the debate on secularization seems to focus around Europe and or "modern" society, students of sociology of religion in Africa have many things to learn from and explore in their study[15] including observing the continuous importance of secularization debate as an important theme in sociology of religion. The next section of the essay is devoted to the idea of religion vis-à-vis development. It first briefly gives an overview of the notion of development in Africa, highlighting how it is conceived, challenging the Western models, and advocating for a bottom-up approach that considers the felt-needs and realities of the target recipients.

IV. Religion and Development – An African Perspective

The secularization paradigm, based on European history and the modernist model of the progressive exclusion of religion from the public sphere, has seen religion as an obstacle to progress, to be sidestepped, ignored or eliminated (Barbara Bompani and Maria Frahm-Arp 2010). From the outset, modern ideas about development generally overlooked the role of religion in Africa, or assumed that it would be relegated to a matter of private belief as secular states gained strength and confidence, or even represented

[13] With variants though, a popular point for recent argument about the metamorphosis is the decline in the number of young people who regularly participate in mainstream Christian churches (Beckford 2003:53).

[14] May be Berger did not realize that the Calvinists' work, which was inspired by the "calling," a religious motivation, was not differentiated or divided into sacred and secular

[15] There are several studies conducted in Africa on the subject matter, Ann Swidler's (2010) "The Return of the Sacred…" is a good example.

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religion as an obstacle to development. As wasindicated in the introductory notes, development process in Africa should consider religion. Strikingly, Gerrie Ter Haar (2010) observes that it is now apparent that religion is a growing force in public life in Africa, as in many other parts of the world. She further asserts that development schemes designed without due reference to local cultures are bound to run into difficulty, and cultures – however interesting they may be from folkloric viewpoint are bound to change.How are the Western models of development viewed, especially in relation to Africa?

Building on the debate on secularization, Dorothea (2010) observes that development in the twentieth century Western European model was seen as progress from a deeply religious, irrational and non-bureaucratic world, to a modern space where material advancement was achieved that led to secularization and loss of the spiritual. This trajectory has not been universal and the United States of America is a good example of a developed nation-state that has not lost all sense of the spiritual and religious discourse in the public sphere. It is worthy to understand the shift from progress to process in understanding development. Progress is about material increase while process tries to bring about the advancement of the whole person and their society. Development should be about helping people realize their potential- what they are, what they can do for themselves, and who they could be. By implication therefore, students of African religion should not be imposing or creating meanings or defining for their subjects what development is. Rather, the subjects should not be objectified or made "other" since they know better what their situations are.

In line with the above, Elizabeth (2010) identifies a difficulty among the Westerners in comprehending how, in African culture a continuum exists between visible and invisible worlds. It is also a surprise to some that religion reaches all sectors of public life, and how religious ideas come to have a bearing on the way political power is actually perceived and exercised. Studying aspects of religion in Africa therefore requires the researcher to appreciate the nature and relationship between the visible and the invisible to the subjects. In other words, isolating or treating religious aspects alone without bringing into cognizance other aspects of the society will not help. Several good examples exist- Linda Thomas' *Under the Canopy* (1999) is a good case, where she considered not only the health but equally social, economic, political, symbolic, etc. aspects of the Saint John's Church in South Africa.

V. Conclusion

This essay briefly highlighted Peter Berger's idea on secularization as well as Max Weber's and providinga critique, and discussing the relationship between religion and development from an Africa perspective. It argues that, the Western models of development are not compatible with Africa for many reasons: they are alien, as well usually attached with conditionalities- just like many African countries experienced with the IMF/World Banks' structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 90s. In addition, the Western models of development as we have illustrated, are not compatible with the norms and values of the people. This means that it neglects or relegates several important aspects of the people's culture, including the role of religion in development. Over the past decade there has been growing interest in engaging with religion, both as a means to achieving established development goals and as it is increasingly recognized that religion is central to the lives and values of most people in developing countries, thereby also paying a potential role in shaping development programs (Ter Haar and Ellis, 2006). As demonstrated, several empirical studiesproved that the contraposition between modernity and religion rooted in Western interpretations of secularism does not ring true in non-Western societies. This relationship needs to be rearticulated in theoretical and interpretive manner. Religion remains the most important means by which Africans secure access to the invisible world. They can achieve their development through utilizing religious ideas and resources[16]. Development, when referred to Africa, should not be considered only in a unilineal, Western, top-down. Instead, it should be from bottom-up, allowing people from the grassroots to identify their problems and prioritize their needs. Failure to appreciate this and apply it to non-Western, mostly African societies, wherethe leaders embrace and applaud the secularized developmentidea at the expense of the citizens who do not benefit from the artificial development, it becomes a terrific façade.

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[16] Gerrie Tar Haar's The "Mbulili Principle…" (2010) has demonstrated how religious leaders utilize local resources to fight poverty. Also, several faith-related agencies have done creditably well in the fight against many social ills including poverty, violence against women, illiteracy, etc. Certainly, this is related to increase in foreign aid, failure of many African states, etc.

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