

DISRUPTIVE IMPACTS OF SECULARIZATION ON THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICIZATION

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Abstract

The contemporary church in Nigeria is currently experiencing worrisome fundamental religious change occasioned by the impactful influence of globalization and secularization. Consequently, new trends and anti-clerical post –modern secular values hitherto unknown in the history of the church have infiltrated into her hallowed system. A more distressing effect of the religious change is the entrenchment of the corrosive culture of materialism in the post-modern church. Globalization is said to have reduced the modern world to one market of world best commodities and have sharpened the consumptive appetite of the modern world with passion for “consumerism” And the post-modern church appears to have been caught in the web. As a result, the church given a divine mandate to spread the counter culture of Christianity at the local, national or cross-cultural levels through a process of inculturation has developed ambivalent attitude towards the mandate because of worldliness. This ill wind of secularization that is blowing in the postmodern church has permeated the entire ecclesiastical system, including the clerical hierarchy and the laity. This paper therefore, investigates the underlying factors behind the secularization process and equally analyzes the far reaching implications of this sociological phenomenon on the post-modern church. The paper further sensitizes the Christian community on the destructive impacts of secularization on the spiritual life of the church. As a panacea to the rising secularization trend in the 21st century church, the paper recommends some de-secularizing antidotes, including a re-awakening of ecclesiastical orthodoxy and a sustained process of religious revivalism. The paper concludes that the secularization ravaging the contemporary church in Nigeria is mainly driven by internal forces within the church rather than the external forces of modernity and globalization which can easily be controlled by the charismatic forces of the church if effectively mobilized.

Keywords: Secularization, Church, Spirituality, Modernization, Nigeria

Introduction

The church of the 21st century operates in a harsh environment of secularization driven by the globalization process. Consequently, the contemporary church appears to have shifted her age-long perpendicular focus from the other worldly realm of spirituality to this world’s realm of materialism. As Berger (1970:68) aptly observes:

The church and secular society are engaged in a bargaining process, but the compromise inevitably favours the stronger party, the secular society. The church may thus become more concerned with preserving herself than with her original mission.

This has resulted to the glaring symptoms of secularization in the contemporary church, such as bureaucratization, religious liberalization, inroad of western cultural values, and a new life style of consumerism and materialism that portend danger for her survival as a spiritual institution. The secondary carriers of modernization, including science and technology, urbanization, population growth and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) have created a new world order of unprecedented human civilization in which the old world order is at risk of either total assimilation or outright displacement of her cherished traditional values. It is thus not difficult to perceive in practical terms how modernity has posed and is still posing some breath-taking challenges to the church in terms of the sustainability of her spiritual life and core values in a value obliterating pluralistic secular new world. In the contemporary secular setting of the post-modern era, everything appears open to question, especially those dimensions of existence that were previously treated uncritically with a sense of awe such as faith, belief system, the supernatural realm, family life, marriage and so on. This is because the man of the 21st century believes he has come of age and can control and manipulate his world. People in this century act more in terms of insight, knowledge, verifiability, and controllability of their world and less in terms of beliefs, faith and superstition. As a result of the overwhelming influence of secularization of the contemporary world, a preponderant population of church adherents of many christian churches have shifted their interest from the “hereafter” to the “here and now” existential life style, thus precipitating a less spiritual but more secularized institution that promotes modernism, church politics, religious commercialization and reformed Christianity instead of moral re-awakening, spiritual revivalism and proselytization.

Perspectives on Secularization

Secularization is a multifaceted concept. Scholars from a wide range of academic fields, including religious studies, philosophy, sociology, political science, history and theological studies look at the concept from diverse spectacles. The Encyclopedia of sociology (2001:125) defines the concept as:

The process by which the sacred gives way to the secular, whether in matters of personal faith, institutional practice or political power. It involves transition in which things once revered become ordinary, the other worldly loses its prefix.

Giving the term an ecclesiastical bent, the World Council of Churches (1975) defines it thus:

Secularization is a process whereby man becomes freed from the prepositions of metaphysical and religious ideology and attempts to understand and live in the various realms of the world on their own terms. In contrast with society in which a particular religious ideology sets limits to a genuine search for truth; the secular society not only permits the diversity of religious ideas but also encourages the pursuit of a sincere and open understanding of the factual reality of the universe--- in the secular society, therefore, man's choices are no longer obligatory and prescribed. Each man is free to seek his own faith and make his assumptions about the purpose of being.

Stibich (1980:25) advances yet another view which defines the concept as a process of social change through which the public influence of religion and religious thinking, decline as it is replaced by other ways of explaining reality and regulating social life.

Mehl (1970:5) thinks secularization means:

The process by which the society disengages itself from religious ideas, beliefs and institutions which have ordered its existence in order to enclose religion in the private sector of life.

Finally, in his classical approach to religion, Tylor (2007) looks at the concept from triple dimensions, namely:

- (i) The retreat of religion from public space.
- (ii) The decline of religious beliefs and practices and
- (iii) The change in the conditions of religious beliefs for the modern age. Expressing his conceptual views further on the subject, Charles Taylor focuses on the nature of religious change between the previous centuries when belief in God was nearly all-inclusive and the contemporary era when it is just an option among many and also a contested one.

Theoretical Framework

The study hinges on “modernization theory” as its theoretical framework.

Modernization Theory

The remit of modernization scholarship remains rather wide with divergent conceptual views. Derby (2005:68), affirms that there is no unified modernization theory but rather there are assortments of related modernization theories and perspectives. Huntington (1976:60) perceives modernization as a transformative process but theorizes that for a society to transit into modernity, its traditional structures and values must be totally replaced by a set of modern values. This implies that traditional religious beliefs and cultural traits become less important as modernization advances into a given locality. In his classical modernization theory, Weber (1990:153) predicts that religion would gradually fade in its importance and ceases to be significant with the advent of the industrial society. He further opines that the increasing dominance of rationalization in the economic, political and cultural life of the modern world would naturally lead to the eclipse of religious reason. Gibson (2006:83) notes that the Weberian modernization theory relies on the key notion of rationalization to explain the uniqueness of the modern societies. By this theoretical orientation, Weber (1990:167) clarifies further that the rationalizing mentality of the modern society would logically result to the disenchantment of the world. Things people once regarded with respect and deep sense of “awe” are stripped of their religious meaning and eventually become mundane.

Weber is not alone in this theoretical school of thought. Prominent 19th century social thinkers such as Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and August Comte, all believe that religion would decline in its levels of religiosity and ultimately ceases to be significant with the advent of industrial society and modernization. For Berger (1967:17), the changes in religious consciousness are due not only to Science and Enlightenment but also to expanding social and cultural pluralism that is a central feature of modernizing societies. The confrontation of modern society with pluralism is posited to damage the plausibility of religious dogma. The relevance and applicability of this theory to our study can be ascertained from its inexorable link with the concept at stake. Evidently, the modernization theory is at the core of the secularization thesis which theorizes that religion would either disappear or become progressively attenuated with the advancement modernity: Basically, modernization theory provides the framework on which the secularization debates is anchored. Moreover, features of modernization such as urbanization, increasing education and literacy, science and technology, socio-economic advancement and globalization among others, have all been identified by the sociologists of religion as critical factors of secularization.

History of the Origin and Rise of Secularization

Scholars and experts in ‘secularization studies’ have traced the historical origin and rise of secularization in the modern world to the historic influence of the Enlightenment Age between the 17 and 18th centuries. Keith (1983:17) shares the thought of Max Weber that the culture of the Enlightenment Era characterized by scholasticism and rationality was responsible for the disenchantment of the modern world and the enthronement of secularization within the period. According to this view, the prevalent atmosphere of skepticism, rationalism and empiricism in the burgeoning period of radical Enlightenment led to the questioning of traditional religious beliefs and the substitution of rational thoughts for faith in many quarters of the evolving modern West.

Qutram (2005:116), adds that the 17th Century can be seen as one of great religious creativity, ushering in an era of secularization of religion possibly its most important legacy. Qutram equally opines that the anti-religious feelings of the age of Enlightenment also culminated in the French Revolution of 1789. In the same vein, writing on the consequences of the Enlightenment mentality for the religious history of the modern world, Israel (2005) notes that:

Radical Enlightenment is the system of ideas that historically has principally shaped the western world’s most basic social and cultural values...democracy ,racial and gender equality, individual liberty of life style, full freedom of thought, expression and press liberty, eradication of religious authority from legislative process and education; and full separation of Church and State.

According to Israel, Enlightenment thinkers, particularly Spinoza, constructed their theories of religious tolerance based on the freedom to think rather than the right to worship. Buckley (1987:39) attributes the rise of religious decline and the wave of secularization during the period of Enlightenment to the religious violence in the preceding years. Buckley notes that the religious violence that raged across Europe at the period had been triggered off by isolated religious crises in Continental Europe, including the expulsion of the Huguenots from France, the Spanish inquisition, the witches’ trials, the civil wars of England, Scotland and the Netherlands.

Linton (2000:172) hints that following the religious crises in Continental Europe, including the seven years’ war induced by religion in France, public opinion was shifted towards religious freedom. This according to Linton, opened the flood gate of tolerance for freedom of worship and peaceful coexistence of religious entities. More importantly, it resulted to the agitation by radical Enlightenment thinkers for freedom of thought and expression. They undermined the authority of the Church by arguing that religion was not the only path to God. They did not think the Church was necessary to make people to be good or behave morally. Edward (1980:92) notes that secularization reached a new level of popularity in the 17th Century era of Enlightenment as a result of the writings of several intellectuals who emphasized the application of reason and science as the surest source of knowledge. According to Edward, the Enlightenment thinkers and the “philosophes” often stressed anti-clericalism, insisting that religion was only good enough for the lower classes, to keep them honest, diligent and peaceful, (an idea that reached its crescendo during the anti-Church movement of the French revolution).

Edward further notes that anti-clerical slogans used by the radical Enlightenment thinkers such as “the worlds arrival at adult hood”, and their agitation for a non-religious interpretation of the society reflect their overt goal to disestablish religion and to build on its ruins a new world founded on secularization. Harry (1995:46) identifies the leading proponents and prime-movers of the radical Enlightenment in most of Western Europe and the U.S to include such thinkers and ‘philosophers’ as: Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, John Locke, Baruch Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, Isaac Newton, Benjamin Franklin and

Thomas Jefferson among others. John lock remains a notable figure in the recorded history of the Age of Enlightenment.

According to Feldman (2005:29), the concept of separating the Church and the State is often credited to the writings of John Locke (1632-1704). Feldman maintains that, "it took John Locke to translate the demand for liberty of conscience into a systematic argument for distinguishing the realm of government from the realm of religion". John Locke argued for individual conscience free from State control. In his principles of "social contract", Locke espoused the ideology of liberty of conscience which he insisted must remain sacrosanct and protected from any government authority. His enlightened views on religious freedom, including his revolutionary concept of liberty of conscience, along with his doctrine of social contract, became particularly influential in the American colonies and useful in the drafting of the United States constitution. Feldman (2005:22) also notes that Locke was a materialist who held the Newtonian view that "all motion is caused by matter, and that even "thought" can be explained as a property of matter, concluding that there is no soul and no need for God.

John Locke was by no means the only Enlightenment secularist. Donald (2000:75) writes that the entire "avant-grade" or vanguard of the Age of Enlightenment comprised of radical thinkers who were either agnostics or outright atheists but remained inexorably identifiable as secular humanists and incurable free thinkers. They attacked the alleged absurdities of religion and corruption of the Church stressing that the individual possessed by irrational faith cannot be in possession of himself. Beyond the fertile soil of Enlightenment on which secularism thrived and blossomed, Owen (2003: 45) adds that an accumulation of other historical developments in both the 19th and 20th centuries has nearly complicated the history of secularization. These include the rise of nation states and nationalism, socialist ideology, urbanization and modernization among other anti-religious forces of the modern world.

Disruptive Impacts of Secularization on the Contemporary Church

The secularization process in the postmodern church has had some multi-dimensional impacts on the church as a religious entity and on the religious, social, political, cultural and psychological lives of the adherents as well. Some of the material positive impacts of the phenomenon on the modern church include, access to information technology and communications (ICT), paradigm shift in the world view of the contemporary church and in her perception of global trends, human capital and infrastructural development, the introduction of modern and efficient church administration and economic prosperity.

The Upsurge of a New Culture of Materialism

The world Book Encyclopedia (1970:237) defines materialism as "a philosophy based on the idea that matter is the only thing in the universe that has reality, and that matter is the basis of all that exists". For Watkins (ed) (1992:421), it represents an emphasis on material objects and needs with little or no interest in spiritual values. In effect materialism involves an inordinate pursuit of those things which can be seen, touched, and tasted, smelled and accumulated. Materialism remains a fundamental disservice of globalization to the modern church. On this note, Dave (1994:63), laments that globalization has exacerbated the already existing crave for materialism in the postmodern church to a fever pitch, if not a new level of addiction, by her "commodification" of nearly every aspect of modern life including her new concept of "consumerism". The warehouse of the postmodern world nurtured by globalization showcases the highest brand of goods and services which is known to have stirred up a new level of materialism and consumerism among the citizenry of the postmodern world, including the contemporary church.

Dave (1994:124) notes further that the 21st century, where nearly everything is turned into a commodity and given a market value, has helped to accentuate the on-going secularization process in the church. He notes that the worldly culture of materialism which has infiltrated into the hallowed church system, appears to have neutralized her spiritual life with its acid rain. And the prosperity preachers have also “commoditized” the gospel and are marketing it to their credulous congregants for quick profit. Apparently the contemporary church appears to have substituted her age long perpendicular focus on spiritual life with obsessive lust for the material things of this present world. Analyzing the implications of materialism for the contemporary church, Guinness (1983:63) labels it the deadliest destroyer of religious life the world has ever seen. Davidson (2012:73) observes concernedly that the pleasure seeking modern church of the 21st century cares very little about her spiritual state. Owing to an overwhelming influence of secularization, the New Age church adherents seem to have blended perfectly with the world system. Many adherents of the contemporary church, according to Davidson are movie –goers, lovers of worldly music, sports fans, football enthusiasts and internet junkies. While some others, are involved in polls-betting, alcoholism, cyber-crimes, immorality and other social vices.

Marvin (2003:96) notes that some “ultra-modern” churches have undergone some remarkable changes in order to key into the unfolding new trends in the pluralistic religious markets. These includes; “the mega church syndrome” liberalization of the spiritual contents of the churches to attract the attention of their secular clientele, emphasis on entertainment oriented programmes, prosperity gospel and the pursuit of various other money making ventures to sustain their high profile of materialism. The high incidence of immorality and corruption among both the prelacy and adherents of the modern church constitute the most damaging impact of secularization on the church. Some of the negative consequences of this immorality and sexual pleasure, according to Levis (2008) include, the incidence of health hazards such as **HIV/AIDS**, hepatitis A, B and C and cervical cancer. Moreover, this condition is known to have the potential to cause various kinds of addictive and compulsive behaviours in the lives of these church members. The postmodern church has almost become an endangered species as a result of overwhelming influence of materialism.

Erosion of the Core Values of the Church

Berger (1990:107) aptly pictures the undermining influence of modernization on the 21st century church, when he noted that “modernity operating like a gigantic steel harmer, has smashed both the traditional institutions and structures of meaning of the old paradigm world”.

Put tersely, the undermining influence of secularization on the organized Christian religion, can distinctively be visualized from its erosion of the spiritual life of the modern church, including her cherished core values. Held et al (2003:38) links globalization with greater trans-border data flow and an increasing interpenetration of culture across the globe. This global culture flow or multi-culturalism has been facilitated by the growth of cheaper travel and information communications technology. Resultantly, there has been a mass dissemination of ideas, music, arts, goods and services as well as counter religious ideologies from one culture to another.

Brown (2002:165), drives home the point, when he noted that globalization fosters and popularizes some counter modern values such as expressive individualism, freedom of conscience, gender equality, fundamental human rights, same sex marriage and a host of other unconventional postmodern values. These trans-border cross penetration of culture induced by the new secular world has helped to erode

theo-centric Christianity as well as the values of the church. The secondary carriers of modernization, such as industrial technology, urbanization, population growth, information and communications technology (ICT) have created a new world order of unprecedented human civilization in which the old world order is at risk of either assimilation or outright displacement of her cherished traditional values. Put in other words, the contemporary church that is called to be a counter-culture is gradually becoming subsumed into the multi-cultural life –style of the global system as a sub culture. Moreso as Herbert (2007-67) aptly observes:

As we become educated and more civilized and understand how things work, some core beliefs become extinct and fall into a state of disuse.

Research findings have shown that some basic core values left behind by the old paradigm church as landmark legacies have nearly been eroded and displaced by transnational culture of the globalized postmodern world. In the current pluralistic setting of the global culture, everything appears open to question, especially those areas of christian life which have been accepted in an uncritical way, such as faith, family life, marriage and sexual orientation.

Moreover, in pluralistic religious markets where a preponderant population of church goers have shifted their attention and interest from the hereafter” to the “here and now” or this world existential life style, religious belief system have always been found to be moribund, on its way to outright rejection and displacement. Edmund (2007:65) laments that the contemporary church has sacrificed her orthodoxy and core values of Pentecostalism for the present inordinate race for materialism. He observes that the two dimensional forces of materialism and humanism freely reigning in the modern church today signify that the church has driven the Holy Spirit away from her midst. Edmund further adds that as a result of the secularization of the modern church, the well-known family core values of spiritual devotion, marital fidelity, obedience to parental authority by the youths, godly upbringing of children by parents have all be compromised, resulting to recurring tension in most Christian families. According to him, the Christian families which stand as a prototype or microcosm of the larger church have equally disconnected from God and have placed all their focus and energy on the pursuit of materialism. He contends that secularization of Christian families in this century has opened the gate-way to a legion of anti-family vices, such as juvenile delinquency, youthful exuberance, divorce, family disunity, tension and etc.

Religious Commercialization and Prosperity Syndrome

Religious commercialization, disapproving labeled by Obilor (2010:158) as new apostasy, constitutes another byproduct of secularization. The secularized religious establishment of this century, according to Oblilor, has become too apostate and materialistic that it no longer recognizes the difference between the “Sacred” and “profane”. Both the secularized priesthood and laity of the 21st century church, according to Obilor, have become guilty of sacrilegious attitude towards the daily ministerial functions of the contemporary church. Routine ministerial functions or activities of the church now reflect some degrees of religious merchandise or commercialization.

Obilor (2010:263) notes succinctly that most of our contemporary religious ministers have deviated from their religious vocations by “selling” God or marketing God or by laying too much emphasis on economic gains and thus making God a commodity. He submits that self-seeking and manipulative preachers turn every service to money making ventures and over burden their members with myriads of offerings and monetary donations artfully designated with some special tags to give them the toga of spiritual or religious-approval or credibility. They usually accompany their collections of unlimited

offerings and donations with rousing testimonies of great divine visitation attendant on previous robust offerings and seed faith with well-selected and compelling bible quotations intended to motivate their audience into action.

Another highly commercialized religious service delivery that has become popular among some contemporary religious leaders, especially the Pentecostals is the family and community deliverance programmes. This, according to Obilor is one of the most lucrative fields of engagements of these money-tangled preachers. Simply because it involves a larger clientele comprising the entire extended family members or a whole community. He reports that the deliverance minister normally charges exorbitant fees with the choice of the type of diet to be prepared for them and their team during the duration of the programme. The prosperity gospel movement of the late 20th and present 21st centuries has been described by some church commentators as preacher-masterminded secularization. Because the prosperity preacher is very much worldly in his approach to wealth acquisition and consumption of secular goods.

Coleman (2000:41) believes that the prosperity theology was domesticated in the United States of America, a land of affluence during the first half of the 20th century, from where it was said to have been exported to other regions of the world, including the sub-saharan Africa. The prosperity sermons according to Coleman is usually reinforced with the laws of faith as it's blessing pact in which God would return donations made by faithful givers seven fold, promising that donors would receive miraculous reward from unexpected sources. Coleman reports that the stupendous wealth generated from the fund raises of these prosperity ministries exacerbated the course of materialism and secularization within the period.

Cyber Delinquency and Deviant Behaviour among Christian Youths

Conclusively, information communication technology (ICT), a by-product of globalization and its corollary of secularization has occasioned the rising incidence of delinquency and deviant behaviour among Christian youths in the organized contemporary religious system. There is a general knowledge that the teenagers and youths constitute the most populous and most addicted users of the social media in this dispensation. Mueller (2006:27) captures the intimate link between the social media and the youngsters in the following assertion:

The social media and the youngsters are dependent on each other. The media need the bustling youth market for economic survival, whilst the youths need the media for guidance and nurture in a society where other social institutions such as family and school do not shape the youth culture as powerfully as they once did.

Research findings show that accessibility to the social media network and their full patronage and utility are glaringly youth dominated. The mass addiction of youngsters to the social media has become a serious cause for concern, especially considering its overall impacts on their unfolding developmental challenges. Ekeoma (2011-160) observes that the internet website or "online" closet has become a new exclusive world of youngsters of the modern world. According to him, they live in this new virtual world almost 24 hours with little attention and engagement in the real world. And counter post-modern values of the social media has been linked with cyber vices and immorality among Christian youths such as economic crimes, sexual promiscuity, including some isolated cases of homosexuality, lesbianism, rape, violence, addiction to pornography and etc. Research findings confirm the view that most youngsters obtain their sexual information from the social media website. The internet provides them

easy access to pornography. In our complex media saturated environment, the youngsters are also exposed to phonographic obsession via the television, digital video recorders, computers, iPods and etc. The incidence of sexual deviancy and other cases of delinquency have been exacerbated by peer group influence. The youngsters share their pornographic materials, sexual experiences and discoveries among themselves and equally extend their peer group influence to other youngsters outside their immediate circles of influence, thereby expanding the frontiers of immorality in the Christian world. Moreover, this significant minority of promiscuous and anti-social youths constitute major spiritual and sociological risk to the greater majority because of the possibility of defiling the purity of the church and spreading negative influence.

Furthermore, sexual immorality is known to have exposed the Christian youths to greater risk of health hazards. Denis (2006:56) cautions that anus and rectum are not sexual organs, they are the drain pipes of the body's sewage "Any one foolish enough to play in the sewer can expect unhealthy consequences" He explained further that anal intercourse has been linked to a host of bacteria and parasitical sexually-transmitted diseases, including **HIV/AIDS**. Other sexually transmitted diseases said to be associated with sexual deviancy and promiscuity include syphilis, gonorrhea, Hepatitis A, B and C. Denis, enunciates other internet induced delinquency and deviant behavior to include drug addition, cultism, cyber-crimes and wastage of significant man hours.

Conclusion

This paper has succinctly analyzed the constraining sociological impacts of secularization on the contemporary organized Christian religion, showing that the phenomenon ravaging the post-modern church is largely as a result of collective compromise of the entire ecclesiastical system. Some of the negative impacts of the phenomenon include, religious commercialization, ecclesiastical corruption, materialism, and upsurge of liberal theology and the erosion of the core values of the church among others. The paper shows that secularization remains more endemic in contemporary churches in urban centers with cosmopolitan outlook and dynamic social life than those in the obscure parts of the countryside.

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