

Secularization And Desecularization Ponderings Of Christian Beliefs In South Africa, Limpopo Province

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Abstract

This study takes a chronological approach to delve into the scholarly debate on secularization, positing that modernity positively correlates to secularising religious thoughts and practices. The study explores the secularization of mainline churches and explains its impact on African Independent and independent Pentecostal churches, leading to desecularisation in Thohoyandou, South Africa. Desecularisation refers to the resurgence of religious influence and practices in the wake of secularization. From 1994, when South Africa received its independence, we meticulously traced the patterns of secularization, leading to the separation of Christian beliefs and the state and the resurgence of church growth, especially for the prophetic churches that continued to proliferate in recent years. The rigorous statistical data analysis on the state of religion in South Africa showed that secularization for mainline churches led to the rise of African Independent and Pentecostal churches, attracting many congregants. These significant findings, backed by robust academic research, are influenced by the approaches to social and economic aspects of life that have a bearing on the human cultures of these churches. It is argued from the results that secularization has occurred. Still, unlike in other developed countries, South Africa's secularization of mainline churches led to desecularisation, a finding that could potentially reshape the field of religious studies.

Keywords: Church, church decline, mainline churches, independent churches.

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I. Introduction And Background

In the past few decades, Western society has witnessed a surge in secularization (Casanova: 2007), with religion's role in daily life diminishing. Once a source of guidance on life and death, social dynamics, and problem-solving, religion has been replaced by a reliance on science. Max Weber (Whimster & Lash: 2014) argued that modernity's influence leads to a decline in religious beliefs and values, replaced by scientific perspectives. In this context, Schoeman (2023) defines secularization as a non-linear process of religious transformation, suggesting the Church and Christians need to adapt and re-establish their positions within this changing landscape. This non-linear process refers to how religious beliefs and practices change over time, influenced by social, cultural, and political factors. Raudino and Barton (2021) define secularism as the separation of religion and the state. For this research, we adopt the idea of Secularization, which is evident when religious beliefs and practices have less influence on the political state, the economy, education, health, and other government institutions, including the family as an institution.

The process of Christianization in South Africa was complex, involving missionaries who played both oppressive and emancipatory roles, hence contributing to the ongoing colonial heritage of the country (Giliomee & Mbenga, 2007). Amid the growth of Christianity, several aspects affected the faith, including political changes and globalization, among others. The cessation of apartheid in 1994 signified a significant transition towards secularism in South African society. The new democratic administration established a constitutional framework emphasising human rights, equality, and the division between religious and governmental matters (Carmody, 2002). Secular ideas arose during this period, challenging Christian moral and social norms. Adopting a secular education policy and encouraging religious diversity were integral to a broader effort aimed at dismantling the remnants of apartheid and fostering an inclusive society.

Additionally, globalisation has substantially influenced religious activity in South Africa, facilitating the exchange of ideas and cultural practices across national boundaries. The introduction of diverse religious concepts, along with the emergence of digital media, has led to the dissemination of secular ideologies and the decline of conventional religious loyalty. Nevertheless, globalisation has facilitated the resurgence of religious

fundamentalism and the emergence of charismatic Christian movements that attract a global following, leading to a vibrant and varied religious environment (Meyer, 2019).

II. Literature

Secularization in South Africa can be understood through various lenses, including historical, legal, and social perspectives.

Historical context of Christianity in South Africa

The influx of European immigrants in South Africa in the 17th century initiated a substantial alteration in the area's religious composition. The advent of colonialism led to the introduction of Christianity to native communities, leading to a significant alteration of their religious beliefs and social structures. For example, the Dutch Reformed Church, founded by the Dutch East India Company, played a significant role in influencing the religious policies of the Cape Colony (Elphick, Davenport, & Davenport, 1997). European religious institutions, including Anglican and Methodist missions, were vital in propagating Christian ideas through missionary efforts. These activities often overlapped with colonial power and cultural imperialism. The Christianization process in South Africa was intricate, with missionaries assuming both oppressive and emancipatory roles, contributing to the country's enduring colonial legacy (Giliomee & Mbenga, 2007).

The rise of secular ideas from 1948 to 1994 and after the end of apartheid.

The end of apartheid in 1994 marked a notable shift towards secularism in South African society. The new democratic administration implemented a constitutional framework that prioritised human rights, equality, and the separation of church and public affairs (Carmody, 2002). During this period, the emergence of secular ideas presented a challenge to the previously dominant Christian moral and social norms. Implementing a secular education policy and promoting religious diversity were crucial components of a larger initiative to dismantle the last effects of apartheid and cultivate an inclusive society.

The influence of globalisation on religious behaviours

Globalisation has significantly impacted religious activity in South Africa by enabling the spread of ideas and cultural practices across national borders. The proliferation of various religious doctrines, along with the advent of digital communication, has resulted in the widespread spreading of secular beliefs and the erosion of traditional religious allegiance. However, globalisation has enabled the revival of religious extremism and the rise of charismatic Christian movements that attract a worldwide audience, resulting in a dynamic and diverse religious landscape (Meyer, 2019).

Constitutional context:

The South African constitution, which was established in 1996 after the end of apartheid, establishes the basis for a secular state. The Bill of Rights (Chapter 2) protects freedom of religion and conscience, affirming that "every individual possesses the entitlement to freedom of conscience, religion, thinking, belief, and opinion."

Additionally, it forbids discrimination based on religion and guarantees that the state maintains a neutral stance on religious questions (Reform & Tenants, 1996).

Religious variety and pluralism refer to the presence of multiple religions and the acceptance of different religious beliefs and practices within a society. The religious composition of South Africa is marked by a wide range of beliefs, with Christianity being the predominant religion, followed by Islam, Hinduism, and indigenous African religions. The nation's shift towards democracy has resulted in a rise in religious diversity, accompanied by a greater acknowledgment of the rights of religious minority groups. Despite the wide range of differences, Christianity nevertheless holds considerable sway in certain areas of South Africa (Mullen & Mitchell, 2002).

Changing religious practices:

Like numerous other regions, South Africa has undergone changes in religious beliefs and practices. The decrease in institutionalised religion, especially among younger generations, can be attributed to urbanisation, globalisation, and industrialization. Certain persons self-identify as non-religious or spiritual but do not associate themselves with any established religious institution. This aligns with the wider worldwide patterns of religiosity (Casanova, 2021). Over the past few years, there has been a notable revival of old Christian practices, demonstrating their enduring resilience amid prevalent secular influences. The resurgence of churches, motivated by the desire for personal identity and connection in a fast-changing society, has revitalised their rituals, community engagement, and efforts to help others, thus strengthening their importance (Cox, 1995). The evangelical movement, a Protestant Christian movement that prioritises the supremacy of the Bible, individual transformation, and the dissemination of the gospel, has witnessed significant expansion in South Africa. This expansion is distinguished by dynamic forms of worship, influential leadership, and a focus on personal

conversion and religious dedication. Evangelical churches have effectively recruited persons from various socioeconomic backgrounds by providing a sense of belonging and guidance (Balcomb, 2004). These movements have also acquired influence through media, education, and political involvement, challenging secular norms and altering public discourse (Gifford, 1998).

Social and Political Dynamics:

Religion intersects with several social and political matters in South Africa, encompassing race, class, gender, and sexuality. Religious organisations and leaders have actively participated in social justice campaigns, such as the fight against apartheid. Nevertheless, conflicts exist between religious factions and the interests of religious and non-religious groups, an example being issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, and education (Villa-Vicencio, Verwoerd, Rotberg, & Thompson: 2003).

For instance, before achieving Independence in South Africa, which the African National Congress spearheaded, religion exerted significant influence over government institutions. Irrespective of personal beliefs, schools and hospitals would conduct prayer sessions, and all individuals would adhere to this practice. Since 1994, there has been a separation between religion and the state. However, there are still occasions where Christian holidays, such as Good Friday and Christmas Day, are recognised. On the other hand, Ascension Day is no longer acknowledged as a holiday (Harteinsten:1992).

This article focuses on the demographic aspects of secularisation, including the changes in the number of church members and the patterns of growth. It does not delve into the practices that reflect beliefs and their descriptions. It acknowledges the impacts of secularisation on desecularization in South African churches. It highlights the significant growth experienced by independent African, and Prophetic churches, while mainline churches have experienced a decline in attendance. In contrast to countries such as America, where modernization has impacted religious influence in terms of the number of members and individual values, South African mainline churches underwent secularisation after 1994, when people were granted religious freedom. Over the past five years, there has been a notable expansion of prophetic Pentecostal congregations (Kgatla:2020). Membership in mainline churches such as Anglican, Roman Catholic, Faith mission church, Dutch reformed church, Lutheran church, and other reformed churches is declining. Pentecostal churches, like Zion Christian Church, particularly those with prophetic elements, have experienced significant expansion despite criticism. Some of these churches have even amassed over 6,000,000 worshippers in a single branch, such as ESG Pretoria. The Zion Christian Church in South Africa has grown significantly, with its membership surpassing 4 million individuals throughout the years (Kruger & Saayman: 2016).

The demographics of the growing churches focus on poverty alleviation through teaching prosperity gospel, prophetic practices associated with traditional healing, and healing practices. It argues that modernization in South Africa has not led to the secularisation of religion but rather to desecularization and the rise of Pentecostalism.

In contrast, Bruce (2003) contended that certain scholars posit that religious affiliation may not be the most accurate indicator of secularisation. They claim that a decline in the influence of religious institutions can manifest in specific domains of life without a concomitant alteration in individuals' religious affiliations. Cole contended that in certain nations such as Saudi Arabia, Muslims did not undergo the process of secularisation. She suggests that whereas the United States, Great Britain, and most of Europe have undergone secularisation, Saudi Arabia stands out as a country that has not. The stringent religious stance of Saudi Arabia is evident in its legislation, social practices, and cultural standards, all of which are tightly aligned with Islamic law and teachings. In the country, there exists a religious police force called Mutaween, whose primary responsibility is to patrol the streets and ensure compliance with religious regulations pertaining to attire, prayer, and gender segregation (Detrick:2017).

III. Methods

Research approach

The study is a documentary research approach, and it is characterized by relying totally on the analysis of data collected from secondary sources, which were created for purposes that do not match the social phenomena being studied by the researchers. The researchers employed creative thinking in researching and translating existing records into quantifiable and understandable concepts and by being open to alternative interpretations of the observed phenomena to get to the gist of the matter (Jamshed, 2014).

The researchers used a non-experimental research design, including the breaking down of documents as the primary method for addressing the phenomenon. According to Allison, (2016), the documentary research design aims to assess the credibility of the available information, critically analyse it, and review gaps. In this study, systematic searching was used. This method uses identified keywords to systematically and thoroughly search documents for appropriate information.

Main findings

The researchers recognised the themes from the literature review. They supplied interpretations based on the secondary literature found in books and journals while contending that the processes of modernization and independence in South Africa resulted in a reversal of secularisation, leading to desecularization.

THEME1: The Introduction of Colonialism and the Dissemination of Christianity among Indigenous Peoples

The religious landscape in South Africa underwent a significant transformation as a result of colonialism, which introduced Christianity to indigenous populations and substantially altered pre-existing religious and social institutions. The Dutch Reformed Church, formed by the Dutch East India Company, and later other European denominations such as Anglican and Methodist missions, were instrumental in the dissemination of Christian doctrines and their integration into colonial governance (Elphick, Davenport, & Davenport, 1997; Giliomee & Mbenga, 2007). The process of Christianization was multifaceted, encompassing both cooperative and coercive interactions with indigenous beliefs. Christianity was frequently employed as a means of cultural imperialism to impose Western ideals and practices under the guise of religious conversion.

Nevertheless, this narrative also explores the concepts of adaptation and resistance. Indigenous tribes did not passively embrace Christianity; instead, they engaged in a multifaceted process of syncretism, which involved the integration of Christian activities with native beliefs. This is evident when South African Christian believers infuse traditional spiritual knowledge in their lives, for example, by consulting with sangoma for physical and spiritual problems. They can also do traditional rituals with spiritual connotations, as it is evident that they still have deep-rooted beliefs in their own traditional religious beliefs. They can go to church but also pray to ancestors; they do ancestral rites for children when they are born and at death. This includes a ritual for child protection at birth, done by a diviner or a healer. When families come across death or life tribulations, they can also call for ancestral interventions, which is in contradiction with Christian religious beliefs. There are churches from African backgrounds that encourage their members to observe these rituals, like rituals offered to ancestors during specific periods, and allow them to come back when they finish the appraisals to their ancestors to ensure things will run well in their families. These people will keep a close relationship with their ancestors who are late as they believe they can intervene in matters such as affection protection, good luck or bad luck, employment, and protection from accident or witchcraft and evil spirits. They firmly believe that deviating can bring bad omen to the families involved.

In South Africa's religious context, missionaries served as agents of colonial control and facilitators of educational and social upliftment, playing a dual role. They implemented novel educational and social structures. This legacy provided a foundation for subsequent secularisation trends, as the interconnection of religion with colonial power provoked a critical re-evaluation of institutionalised religion during and after apartheid.

THEME2: The Secular State and the South African Constitution

By emphasising human rights, equality, and the separation of religion from official operations, the post-apartheid South African Constitution of 1996 established a framework for a secular state. This constitutional amendment was a substantial stride towards secularisation, reflecting a broader global trend of religion privatisation and a focus on individual liberties. Chapter 2, also known as the Bill of Rights, of the Constitution, guarantees the freedom of religion, belief, and opinion while explicitly prohibiting religious discrimination. This legal foundation highlights the state's dedication to safeguarding minority rights, promoting religious pluralism (the recognition of various religious beliefs and practices), and maintaining neutrality on religious matters.

The affirmation of secularism in the constitution was not merely a formality; it was a substantial stride towards the eradication of the remnants of apartheid, which were inextricably linked to specific Christian doctrines. The secular framework aimed to establish a society that was inclusive and could accommodate the diverse religious and cultural identities of South Africa. The Constitution changed the relationship between religion and public life by institutionalising secular ideals, promoting a more pluralistic and tolerant society, and restricting the influence of religious groups in governmental activities.

THEME 3: Urbanisation, industrialization and globalisation : Towards the decline of institutionalised religion.

Globalisation, urbanisation, and industrialization have all contributed to the decline of institutionalised religion in South Africa. These advancements have affected the socioeconomic environment, leading to modifications in religious affiliations and behaviours (Casanova, 2021). Urbanisation has resulted in a population transition from rural areas, where traditional and community forms of worship were more prevalent, to metropolitan centres, where secular ideals and lifestyles are more prevalent. The disintegration of traditional religious relationships and the emergence of individual spirituality or secular worldviews have frequently resulted from the anonymity and diversity of urban living.

Globalisation has expedited the dissemination of secular ideologies and cultural customs, thereby undermining the legitimacy of conventional religious organisations. The emergence of digital communication has hastened the dissemination of secular perspectives and alternative religious ideologies, leading to a more fragmented and fluid religious landscape. Industrialization, which prioritises scientific advancement and logic, has undermined the influence of institutionalised religion by advocating for secular and materialistic principles. These changes indicate a broader global trend towards secularisation, which involves the privatisation and diversification of religious experiences, as religious affiliation is no longer a social necessity and becomes a personal decision.

THEME 4: The Confluence of Religion with Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality

The intersection of religion influences the secularisation and desecularization movements in South Africa with a variety of social identity characteristics, including race, class, gender, and sexuality. In this context, religious identity is how individuals and communities perceive and articulate their religious beliefs and practices, as well as the ways in which these beliefs and practices affect their social relationships and experiences. Throughout history, religious institutions have played a conflicting role in supporting and opposing social injustice. For instance, during apartheid, certain Christian denominations supported the dictatorship, while others, such as liberation theology organisations, were instrumental in the fight for social justice (Villa-Vicencio, Verwoerd, Rotberg, & Thompson, 2003).

Religion remains integral to social and political concerns in the post-apartheid era, reflecting broader societal changes and tensions. Confrontations between progressive secular principles and conservative religious views arise as a result of the acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, and gender equality, which contradict conventional religious standards. This intersection serves as an illustration of the ongoing discourse between secularisation and religious revival, in which religious organisations either accommodate or oppose evolving social norms.

Additionally, the emergence of evangelical and charismatic movements, which frequently appeal to marginalised individuals by addressing their socioeconomic issues, is a form of desecularization. In a society that is constantly evolving, these movements offer a sense of identity, community, and moral guidance, often challenging secular norms and influencing public discourse. The dynamic and contested environment of the relationship between religion and race, class, gender, and sexuality in South Africa today reflects the complex interplay of secular society. In South Africa, there are various independent churches that have the largest population, including Zion Christian Churches, with 11 percent of the population, the Apostolic Church, with 10 percent, and the charismatic church, experiencing a booming of church members, which reflects the majority black nation. The other Christian groups affected by secularization include Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, and members of the Greek Orthodox, Dutch Reformed, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Assemblies of God, and Congregational Churches. The population in South Africa reflects that Persons of Indian or other Asian heritage account for 2.5 percent of the total population. Half of the ethnic Indian population is Hindu, and the majority reside in KwaZulu-Natal Province. The Muslim community includes Cape Malays of Malayan-Indonesian descent, individuals of Indian or Pakistani descent, and approximately 70,000 Somali nationals and refugees. The SAJBD estimates the Jewish community at 60,000 persons, the majority of whom live in Johannesburg and Cape Town. International Religious Freedom Report (2020)

IV. Conclusion

This study reflects on the secularisation of mainline churches and its impact on the growth of African Independent and Pentecostal prophetic churches in South Africa. Religious beliefs and practices have changed over time as influenced by various social, cultural, and political factors. As observed from the literature, religious beliefs and practices have lost influence on social institutions, including the state. Globalization and its influence on ideas and cultural practices have spread widely in South Africa. Globalization has also attracted worldwide guidance, resulting in a dynamic and diverse religious landscape in South Africa, but African churches have continued to rise, observable with African cultural practices distinct from other Christian behaviors worldwide. Changes in demographic aspects, included members of the church declining from mainline churches but increasing the number of African Independent and Pentecostal churches, leading to the desecularisation of these newly grown churches. Hence, we conclude that South African mainline churches have experienced secularisation that has led to the desecularisation of independent African churches and Pentecostal churches.