

MODERN/CHARISMATIC PENTECOSTALISM AS A FORM OF 'RELIGIOUS' SECULARISATION IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that although Pentecostalism seems to be reviving Christianity in Africa, judging by the number of people attracted to this brand of Christianity, there is an extent to which its practices and beliefs are secular. Perhaps it is this 'secularisation' that remains a pull factor of this kind of Christianity. To do so, the paper begins with a brief review of the secularisation theory, reaching a conclusion that secularisation involves people's concern with proximate (this worldly) issues rather than ultimate (post-mortem) issues. With this understanding of secularisation, the paper then discusses beliefs and practices of charismatic Pentecostal churches that this author believes make Pentecostalism a form of 'religious' secularisation. The focus will specifically be on Zimbabwean charismatic Pentecostal leaders' discourses of wealth and health.

Key words: Pentecostalism; religious secularisation; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Whereas the influence of secularism is apparent in the Western world,¹ Africa has been thought of as resisting this phenomenon. Thus there has been talk of the shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity from the secularised West to the South (Africa, Asia, Latin America) (Jenkins 2002; Walls 2002; Gerloff 2008). In Africa this is

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probably because 'Africans are notoriously religious', as Mbiti (1969, 1) argued many years ago. But interestingly, as Mbiti wrote this in 1969, three years earlier in 1966, Samarin (1966, 288-297) had noted the observation by some sociologists that Africa would become increasingly secular. Shorter (n.d.) noted the fulfilment of this 'prophecy': 'So far from the African being inherently, if not "notoriously" religious, secularism is rapidly becoming a more generalised phenomenon in the African continent, spreading from a small circle of privileged individuals to a whole society undergoing a spectacular evolution.' Elphick (1997, 1-15) observes: 'In South Africa, unlike in western Europe, secularization has been accompanied, not by a decline in religious devotion, but by a dramatic rise.' It has been noted time and again that Pentecostalism, especially charismatic Pentecostalism or what I call modern Pentecostalism, is the fastest growing type of Christianity in Africa (Marshall 1992, 7-32). Such is the case that today Pentecostal scholars talk of mega-churches with reference to large Pentecostal churches which attract thousands of followers at their normal services (Gunda, forthcoming). Due to this proliferation of Christianity, there has been little talk of the secularisation of African societies. Rather it is with reference to Western societies, particularly Europe, that secularisation theories have been discussed (Lechner n.d., Williams 2008). Through 'reverse mission' (Ter Haar 1998; Burgess 2011), it has been argued that African Pentecostal churches are indeed fighting secularisation by evangelising secular Europe.² The task of this paper is to problematise the view that Pentecostal proliferation and public presence show the social force of religion, in this case Christianity, and therefore the absence of secularisation in such societies as Africa. In concurrence with Shorter (n.d.) and Elphick (1997), this article argues that although Pentecostalism seems to be reviving Christianity in Africa, judging by the number of people attracted to this brand of Christianity, there is an extent to which its practices and beliefs are secular.³ Perhaps it is this 'secularisation' that is attracting people to it. Otherwise, how would one explain the growing numbers of Christians in Africa and the growing rates of social ill (sin in Christian parlance) in the form of wars, corruption, tribalism and tribal conflicts, bad governance, abuse of women and children, high crime rates, social violence and so on? To do so, the paper begins with a brief review of the secularisation theory, reaching a conclusion that secularisation involves people's concern with proximate (this worldly) issues rather than ultimate (post-mortem) issues. With this understanding of secularisation, the paper then discusses beliefs and practices of charismatic Pentecostal churches that this author believes make Pentecostalism a form of 'religious' secularisation. The article specifically focuses on Zimbabwean charismatic Pentecostal leaders' discourses of wealth and health. Data on the Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches are drawn from Pentecostal sermons and literature. Zimbabwean public and private media have also paid close attention to these movements and I draw a lot of data from them. These churches make widespread use of the media, especially the World Wide Web. This paper endeavours

to make a content analysis of church literature, videos and audios posted on YouTube and the churches' websites.

Secularisation

By their nature, definitions are misleading, since they tend to box 'things', taking those in the box as 'the things' and those out of the box as not. This is very true of the word secularisation itself. In its general usage the word refers to 'the process of religious decline' (Haralambos and Holborn 2004, 436). It is also defined as 'the transformation of a society from close identification with religious values and institutions toward nonreligious (or irreligious) values and secular institutions' (Wikipedia n.d.). Canadian philosopher Mayer (quoted in Dallmayr 1999) sees secularisation as a 'turning toward this world' or toward this age, a turning which serves as an antidote to an extreme other-worldliness where the 'supernatural' was given 'too much priority' (Dallmayr 1999, 722). But a close look at these definitions raises further problems. To start with, the question arises: What is religion? Also: What are the signs of religious decline? Proponents of the secularisation thesis have not bothered themselves with answering these questions. They have, however, taken religion to be Christianity. They have therefore concentrated on the signs of 'the process of religious decline'. Influenced by the evolution theories of the nineteenth century, a number of these proponents (e.g. Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim) believed that as societies 'progress', secularisation becomes inevitable. Through modernisation, industrialisation and rationalisation, it is believed, religion loses its authority in all aspects of social life and governance (Bilton et al). For Casanova (1994), the discourse on secularisation stands on two legs; one deals with diminishing numbers and the other focuses on declining influence. The basic tenets of secularisation were summarised by Mills (1959, 32-33) in the following words:

Once the world was filled with the sacred – in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, perhaps, in the private realm.

But there have been antagonists to the secularisation thesis. These include Martin (2005) who even argued that the word 'secularism' should be erased from the dictionary.⁴ The argument of the antagonists was that, at every point in the history of Christianity, there were some people who were nominally attached to it, though we cannot talk about such people as having been influenced by secularism. They have also pointed out that the secularisation thesis is based on nineteenth century evolution theories, which have their own weaknesses. There are also many other arguments presented by antagonists. All that literature on secularisation shows is a deep division between those who want to accept that secularisation is a modern

reality influenced by science, modernity and rationalisation, and those who believe it to be a creation by its proponents. In the meantime, the intellectual landscape has changed or become more diversified. Many social scientists and social theorists have begun to challenge the traditional 'secularisation thesis', especially its argument on the disappearance of religion from the public (Dallmayr 1999, 715-735). This is mainly out of the realisation that, especially through fundamentalist movements and Pentecostalism in Africa, religious presence in the public is growing. They note that religion in modern times has not so much vanished as rather evolved and adapted itself in novel ways to the requirements of post-industrial society. This paper takes a serious view of the reality of secularisation, however it is defined. Although we have focused on definitions that emphasise the decrease of religious membership and influence in society, this paper argues that secularisation is also evident when religion (in this case, the church) begins to be influenced and itself begins to promote 'secular' values over the traditional/historical Christian values.

The article therefore shows how modern Pentecostalism has secularised traditional Christian values, allowing us to see it as some form of religious secularisation. Thus the decline in numbers and the religious influence are not used here as criteria for measuring the level of secularisation a society has undergone. Rather it is the extent to which the society has moved from traditional Christian values to acceptance of modern 'secular' values'.⁵ Thus we argue that secularisation involves people's concern with proximate (this worldly) issues rather than ultimate (post-mortem) issues. As Somerville (1998) notes, here individuals moderate their behaviour in response to more immediately applicable consequences rather than out of concern for post-mortem consequences. Even in the churches themselves, secular ideas, techniques and expectations gain influence. This is what we argue in the subsequent part of this paper.

Pentecostalism as secularism

As alluded to above, numbers and observation of religious functions cannot be used on their own to measure levels of religiosity. Like in the days of Amos (5: 21-24), the eighth century Hebrew Bible prophet, people can throng places of worship as a matter of routine, yet without any religious convictions.

Bruce (1990, 17-18) argues that secularisation has been part and parcel of religions from time immemorial. He points out that 'Judaism and Christianity can be seen as more secular than the religions which they replaced'. He says this is seen in their simplification of the existent religions, for example, in replacing a pantheon with just one God. He further says that even the Reformation further secularised Christianity by removing much of the magic characterising it then, with an ethical and rational religion. In the same vein, Max Weber's 'Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism' thesis (quoted in Bruce 1990) shows how the combination of Reformation ideas and the spirit of capitalism replaced the previous medieval notion

of monasticism, giving way to simple worldliness (Bruce 1990, 18). This trend, of secular values and practices being incorporated into the church, has continued and is quite evident in Pentecostalism in Africa today. Studying a Pentecostal church called His People (HP) Christian Church in Johannesburg, South Africa, Czeglédy (2008, 284-311) concluded that 'at least some of the success of HP relies on its ability to utilise secular symbols and practices that tap into values of social reconstruction and economic achievement that are an integral part of wider elite relations in post-apartheid South Africa'. He further noted that HP clearly fostered perspectives that reinforced their religiosity with more localised forms of secular expression and identity sensitive to their own social context. We should emphasise the importance of context that Czeglédy (2008) talks about in discussing the secularisation of Pentecostal churches in Africa. The Zimbabwean case discussed below, shows this.

We noted above that secularisation in Pentecostal churches is seen in how they have undermined traditional values in favour of modern, secular values. Below we therefore discuss the secularisation of modern Pentecostal churches under the following headings: the search for health; the search for wealth (consumerism); the search for pleasure (music and dance); and inattention to post-mortem doctrines. In each case we show how traditional Christian teaching understood these concepts and how secularism has affected (or rather accommodated into) the Pentecostal teaching and understanding of each value.

Health

Secularism is materialistic; there is therefore less talk about immortality. Health in the here and now is emphasised. Perhaps the influence of secularism can then be seen in the centrality of healing practices in modern Pentecostal churches. Most of these churches use healing as the major member recruitment method. In Zimbabwe, specific Pentecostal churches like ZAOGA started through the healing powers of their founders.⁶ The healing of the physical body has continued even in the newer Pentecostal churches like United Family International Church (UFIC) and Christ Embassy. Scores of people attend these churches from different corners of the country and beyond in search of healing. The prophets of these churches claim to heal all kinds of diseases, including instant weight loss, cancer, HIV and diabetes.

Wealth

If there is an area where religious secularisation is explicit in Pentecostal doctrine, it is the place of wealth. The Pentecostal churches explored in this paper are well-known for preaching the gospel of prosperity. With its teaching that wealth is a sign of God's blessings upon an individual, the gospel of prosperity is indeed a departure from the traditional Christian teaching of *hatina musha panyika* (Shona: we have no home in this passing world). Prosperity preachers are very much 'this-

worldly' in their approach to wealth and consumer materialism in general. Owning cars, houses, successful businesses and other material possessions is not only accepted but expected of those who have the right dosage of faith. In Zimbabwe, some Pentecostal preachers are no longer just talking of possessing any kind of cars, but these blessings are even said to be seen in the kind or make of car(s) that one owns; with makes like Mercedes Benz, Lamborghinis, Bentleys and Range Rovers topping the list of cars possessed by preachers such as Uebert Angel and Emmanuel Makandiwa (Phiri, n.d.). Accumulation of wealth is therefore very central in the practices of the modern Pentecostals. This applies both to individuals and to the churches. There is competition to present the churches as modern, wealth-adorned institutions in architecture, furnishings and in administration. Celebration Church boasts of the largest and, so far, the most expensive church building in Harare, while UFIC of Emmanuel Makandiwa is constructing a competing church hall in both respects in Chitungwiza. Just the Women's Fellowship fleet of buses owned by UFIC speaks volumes about the place of wealth in this church. Business talk in the form of wealth and wealth creation is the language of the members of these churches. Togarasei (2012) discusses how these churches emphasise the creation and running of businesses to the extent of discouraging being employed. This article concurs with Shorter (n.d.) when he notes that consumer materialism is the form of secularism most prevalent in the contemporary world, and the form which is rapidly becoming more evident in Africa. Influenced by the global culture of economism propelled by technological advances, Africa is now gripped by the spirit of economic growth. This is particularly so in Zimbabwe following the crisis years of 2000-2010. There is a general positive economic growth in the country and the Pentecostal gospel of prosperity has been found palatable. With it, individuals are not torn between belonging to this world and getting ready for the world to come, as the Pentecostal gospel emphasises blessings in the here and now. People can now seek the kingdom of God as they seek wealth at the same time. Sociologists (Kenny and Smythe 1997, 319-320) have noted that the availability of consumer goods enmeshes people into worldliness. It is no surprise then that the gospel of prosperity has little room for other-worldliness, making it possible for us to conclude that Pentecostalism is some form of 'religious' secularism.

The influence of secularism in the Pentecostals' quest for wealth is also seen in individualism. Shorter (n.d.) notes that the current secular world is driven by neo-liberal market ideology, which is rooted in individualism or the logic of self-interest whereby success is calculated in terms of economic growth, not in the equitable sharing of wealth. The secular ideology of individualism in Pentecostal churches has long been identified by scholars like Hunt (2000). The quest for wealth is often for individual social mobility. Each born-again strives to achieve the best for him/herself in life, with only a few such churches engaging in programmes meant for the betterment of their communities. Thus according to Shorter (n.d.), the Church has unconsciously introduced secularism by promoting a privatised, departmentalised

religion that does not effectively challenge the myths of economism. He further observes: 'Consumer materialism is nowadays the most common cause of secularism. Rather than formal unbelief, it is a religious indifferentism induced by the preoccupation with material things.' Although Shorter (n.d.) was thinking of the universal church, his observations are particularly true of modern Pentecostal churches with their emphasis on individual wealth and success. As we discuss further below, this preoccupation has even seen the churches ignoring matters and discourses of the after-life.

Pleasure/music and media

The influence of secularism in modern Pentecostal churches is also very observable in the areas of music and media. To start with the area of music, one can notice how these churches have revolutionised church music. Modern musical instruments comparable or even better than those of secular musical bands, adorn the altars of modern Pentecostal churches. Some of the churches, like the Celebration Church, even have music recording studios that not only cater for the church musicians but for secular musicians as well. Over and above the musical instruments, modern Pentecostal churches have also adopted secular musical styles and genres. In a study of His Presence Church in Johannesburg, South Africa, Czeglédy (2008, 284-311), for example, noticed that the church's music was characterised by a heavy 'drum & bass' soundtrack in the style of South African township music called *kwaito*. Czeglédy (2008, 297) comments: 'This unconventional choice of music was not arbitrary, for *kwaito* is the most iconic symbol of South Africa's youth culture today, and its usage sends a powerfully contemporaneous message to the audience.' In Zimbabwe modern Pentecostal churches have incorporated popular music genres like *museve*, *rhumba* and *soukous* into church music. Without getting the lyrics of the songs, one can mistake church worship services with any other musical concerts. The newer Pentecostal churches like Spirit Embassy of Uebert Angel have also added rap and R&B music. The dancing, the jumping and the singing are therefore typically secular. As if to confirm the religious secularisation of churches, one pastor has explained this development by saying 'the church must provide those things that the people go into the world for' (Pastor Bandimba, Interview: Harare, 1999).

As mentioned above, there is nothing that distinguishes the Pentecostal music from secular music but the lyrics. The same is true of the contact of the musicians. Like secular musicians they also organise musical shows which are similar to secular musical shows in all senses. They record and sell music for profit and in Zimbabwe recent statistics show that because of the popularity of gospel music, there are more gospel musicians than secular ones (Togarasei 2007). Noticing this secular influence, Zimbabweans have for long debated whether gospel musicians are 'making money or spreading the gospel?' (Togarasei 2007).

Like music, Pentecostal use of the media shows the heavy effects of secularism. Described by Cox (1995, 102) as 'a religion made to travel', from its onset, Pentecostalism made intensive use of the media from print to electronic. This trend has continued with the modern Pentecostals. The widespread use shows how this movement has been secularised. Not only are traditional media forms used, the churches have moved on to modern media technologies like cellular phones, the internet, street billboards and street-light advertisements, satellite broadcasting and so on. This has led to 'the commoditization and consequent trivialization of Christianity...as Christianity, like Coca Cola is advertised in the public' (Togarasei 2012, 271). Czeglédy (2008, 306) noted that the advertisements of Pentecostal churches in the form of charts and billboards have become so sophisticated 'in a way that is both reminiscent of and equivalent in standard to corporate/commercial artwork'. It must be taken into consideration that this close association of the church and other secular institutions is probably what makes Pentecostal Christianity popular in an age where secularism is dominant. In the language of business, God is 'branded' through Pentecostal media technologies (Ukah 2006, 83-106). The churches' appropriation of secularism helps bridge the gap between the secular world and the church. Little wonder then that many youths are attracted by these churches.

Dearth of post-mortem doctrine

Traditional Christian teaching has it that believers are not citizens of this world. They are pilgrims on a journey to heaven. In other words, the emphasis is on taking the time here on earth to prepare for one's final destiny. Texts such as Matt. 7:21-23; 13:36-43; 25:31-46; John 5:28-29 are used to argue for post-mortemism. Believers are taught to strive for purity now, for in the post-mortem life they will either be rewarded or condemned based on what they did in this life. This doctrine about heaven and hell, rewards and punishments in the post-mortem has all but disappeared in Pentecostal churches. This silence is a sure indication of the influence of secularism on Pentecostal theology. Rarely does one hear Pentecostal preachers talking about the world to come, the Parousia, the age to come. Instead, their messages are concerned with this world's affairs, particularly health and wealth. Blessings are now, punishments are now and judgment is now – that is their message. Also rarely does one hear Pentecostal preachers talk about sin and its results in terms of after-life. The greatest sin often identified in their sermons is that of failing to observe the law of tithes. This is a clear sign that modern Pentecostalism is some form of 'religious secularism', as it concerns itself more with secular (this-worldly) matters than post-mortem matters.

Other signs of religious secularism in Pentecostalism

Whereas classical Pentecostalism and conservative evangelicals could be accused of being concerned with winning souls for heaven (to the extent of forgetting that believers are still living in this world), modern Pentecostals seem to have gone to the other extreme. Members of these churches are so involved with the needs of this secular world that Christianity serves only as a means to attain secular 'goods'. Issues of Christian morality are not emphasised. That Christians are the salt and light of the world, is no longer underlined. Mashau (2009, 108-126), in referring to evangelical Christians, says the tragedy with this is that Christians can be in the majority, yet they will never have a direct impact on society. Giving the post-apartheid South African society as an example, Mashau (2009) says this explains why although Christians are still in the majority, society is still marred by corruption, high crime rates, family violence, abuse of women and children, the HIV and AIDS pandemic, poverty and unemployment, xenophobic attacks, and all kinds of social ills. This is the same picture we find in Zimbabwe where thousands, if not millions, have accepted the Pentecostal gospel. Wealth received through criminal and corrupt means is even attributed to God's blessings. This is a clear sign that secular values have entered the church. Secularism is seen in the concern with the temporal dimension of human and social life.

Conclusion

On the surface, the mushrooming of modern Pentecostal churches seems to disprove originally formulated secularisation theories. If we use numbers to make the judgment, it may be true that religion is growing in strength in Africa. However, this paper argues that Pentecostalism rather presents some form of religious secularism in Africa. Instead of secularism being expressed in terms of dwindling numbers of Christians and the weakening of the church's authority in society, Pentecostalism has brought the tenets of secularism right to the doorstep of the church. Charismatic Pentecostalism, as expressed in the churches identified and discussed in this paper, has lost many traditional forms of organised Christian religion as they seek and accommodate secular values in their teaching and practice. As Czeglédy (2008) says in the case of His Presence Church in South Africa: 'The design aesthetics, the use of certain languages, the incorporation of specific musical instruments and styles, the themes of the sermons, etc., act as important points of reference in a community that has consciously rejected the conventional symbolic embroidery of organised religion.' The churches have embraced secular values although they express them in religious language. They have succeeded in incorporating essentially secular elements, giving them a religious garb. This, as we have seen, is clear in the churches' doctrine of health and wealth, in the place of music and media and in the dearth of post-mortem theology. Thus we have used the term 'secularism' to express not

necessarily a denial of religion, but rather a kind of temporal change, an adjustment of religious faith to the experiences and 'exigencies of an age'. In the words of the Turkish philosopher, Kuquradi, what happens in secularisation would then be a sort of temporalisation – which in the modern age goes by the name of 'modernisation' (Kuquradi quoted in Dallmayr, 1999, 720).

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