

The Missional Church in a Secular World: A Response to the Rise of Secularism in Africa

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Abstract

This article focuses on the missional response to the rise of secularism and its manifestations in contemporary Africa. Due to globalization and urbanization, Africa has had a radical social-economic, cultural, and religious shift. Globalization has led to the spread of secularism, a set of beliefs and ways of life that disdain or denounce all forms of religious faith and worship, aiming at completely eradicating all spiritual components from society. It manifests in different dimensions such as materialism, relativism, atheism, pluralism, nominalism, and many others, also called circular humanism. Yet, the church is the people God has called from the world to Himself and sent them to the world (missional role) to reconcile it to Himself. This study examines the broader manifestations of secularism and the appropriate missional response of the church. As technology and humans advance through the capacity to accomplish huge tasks, there's a tendency of human self-dependence, which creates a society that attributes nothing to God but to self, eventually making God irrelevant. As technology and skilled labor continue to increase, faith in God and religion seemingly become more irrelevant. Therefore, the missional response of the church involves reclaiming true reverence and worship of God.

Keywords: Missional Church, Secularism, Pluralism, Individualism, Materialism, Globalization.

Introduction

This article examines the response of the whole church of Christ in taking the whole gospel to the secular world as its divine mandate, also known as missional ecclesiology. The rapid changes in society have brought in new challenges like “family uprooting, urbanization, unemployment, materialistic seductions of all kinds, a certain secularisation, and intellectual



upheaval caused by the avalanche of insufficiently critical ideas spread by media” (Shorter & Onyancha, 1997). All these are the inescapable realities in Africa, thus leading to a situation in which religious faith is felt superfluous for one reason or another. It has led to the cessation of organized religion’s dominance and a worldview that rejects the immanence of God. In this context, the body of Christ (the church) has a divine mission.

This perspective that religious faith is superfluous robs Christianity of its distinction and, thus, merges it with all other beliefs since the belief system is a matter of individual expression. Further, “In a pluralistic society where multiple truth claims and religious convictions coexist, the charge is often leveled that the Christian faith cannot have universal validity. Furthermore, attempting to convert persons from other faiths to Christianity is condemned as intolerant, bigoted or imperialistic” (Ott et al., 2010). Precisely, this is how secularism manifests, and the problem is that it does not only encourage a godless society, but it also restrains the attempts of the church to proclaim the unique and exclusive gospel and salvation through Christ Jesus. It also rejects the distinctiveness of Christianity and pebbles any claim of distinction extremism.

Secularism entails a view of the world without God. It pushes for an agenda that promotes pluralistic beliefs that all regions are equal and valid, thus discounting the need for evangelism. Secularism not only promotes godlessness in the world but also frustrates the church’s missional mandate, knowing Christ and making him known. The study examines secularism, identifies its expressions, and projects the church’s missional mandate.

As Kirk puts it, “There is good evidence for Jesus’ belief that those he called to be with him would continue his mission of proclaiming and performing God’s rule on earth” (Kirk, 2000). Therefore, the church is the people who have been called out of the world to belong to Christ and sent back to the world to proclaim and demonstrate God’s reign. It has no room for conformism, yielding to worldly standards or escapism, detaching itself from the world, but to be the agent of God’s rule, mission, and Kingdom. In sub-Saharan Africa, where there is a numerical increase in the number of Christians, there is still a need for biblical grounding of believers. Christianity needs to maintain its transformative element; it has been observed that “In society today, many beliefs have been domesticated; we don’t even care about them anymore after all, we think so many beliefs are merely passing fashions, or momentary expressions of individual want or desires” (Dever, 2013).



The Missional Church

The primary concern and purpose of the church's existence is to fulfill "the purposes and activities of God in and for the whole universe" (Wright, 2006). God's mission entails "all that God is doing in his great purpose for the whole of creation and all that he calls us to do in cooperation with that purpose" (Wright, 2010). It involves redemption and restoration. The church is missional when all aspects of life and functioning are intentionally purposed to achieve God's mission. A missional church never loses sight of the grand redemptive plan of creation. Every project, event, and any church engagement and fellowships should not just have a sense of missions but wholesomely characterised, determined and defined by the divine redemptive plan of God for the universe.

Church's existence in the world should always be missional because God is a missional God; his chosen people, the church, are missional. This means that the church's mission emerges from the heart of God and becomes central to believers. Those called from the world to belong to God are the agents of God's mission, which makes missions not just a mere department in the church as many presume, but the heartbeat of believers because it is not an invention of believers but a divine purpose of God mandated to the church. Grudem defines the church as "those whom Christ died to redeem, all those who are saved by the death of Christ and are called to belong to him" (Grudem, 2020).

The church is naturally missionary, and when this missional mandate is not achieved and lived, it has not just failed in its mission department but as a whole because the mission is the whole reason why the church exists. When the actual purpose of existence is missed, the church loses its existence. Missions is not just something the church does but what the church is. The whole point of the church's existence in the world is to radiate God's glory for all nations to see and worship. Because God desires all nations to worship Him, he has ordained missions as the means to make His name glorified, for "If there is any overreaching purpose of mission it is: God's glory should be magnified in all the earth before all creation" (Ott et al., 2010)

Piper clarifies, "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions" (Piper, 1993). Therefore, the essence of the church's mission is to let God be known, believed, and glorified in all nations. This is true today, especially in the world of growing secularism. The people of God



have always been called to demonstrate or radiate God’s glory to other nations. This is evident in the Sinai covenant God made with Israelites by declaring them as treasured possessions among all peoples, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exod 19:5–6). In the new covenant of Christ, believers as the redeemed people of God are referred to as the salt of the earth, and the light of the world (Matt 5: 13–16), those who were mandated to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). Therefore, a missional church is God’s redeemed people with a divine mandate to make disciples everywhere, anywhere and anytime. Missions in a context that is becoming more secularized is of great importance. The section below defines it and shows its manifestations.

Secularism

Essentially, secularism argues that man does not need God. It can be characterized as a set of ideologies and behaviors that dismiss or reject any manifestations of religious belief and worship, and its primary goal is the complete eradication of all expressions of religion from society. Secularism fronts the idea that the world is self-explanatory and existent and, therefore, needs no supernatural authority; it strives to discredit the idea that there is a distinctive sacred.

Secularism teaches that no infallible standards define what is right and wrong. Secularising anything means making it worldly and unspiritual. It seeks to strip something of its religious nature, spiritual sway, and importance. Secularism comes with “the decline in public religious participation, religious membership, and increased privatization of religion” (Igboin, 2022). It attacks families, the church, communities, and governments. It is literary humanity displacing God and enthroning himself, thus resulting in all forms of perversions and societal disorders that are inescapable in contemporary Africa. In the second half of the 20th century, the secularism wave ignited controversies over issues such as “legalizing same-sex marriage and assisted dying. Freedom of speech and clashes around reproductive rights and equality issues have all featured highly on national political agendas” (Kettell, 2019). There are several dimensions of secularism, as discussed below.

Manifestations of Secularism in the Contemporary World

Secularism takes different forms and ways of manifestation, like materialism, ethical relativism, excessive love for self, pluralism, entertainment, and celebrity culture.



Focus on Materialism

Materialism is literary defined by Stott as “a preoccupation with material things which can smother our spiritual life” (Stott, 2010). It is not to say that we should not accept the reality of the material world. God has created the material world and made its blessings available to us. The problem is when the blessings of the material world become an object of worship, all that we live for. And “if material stuff is understood to be the very foundation of being, people are naturally going to devote their lives to the task of acquiring such stuff, and this is nowadays the most common form of secularism” (Shorter & Onyancha, 1997).

In the contemporary world, materialism has changed the moral setup of society. In many traditional societies, people no longer listen to elders as before but to the rich. If the goal of every societal member is material possession, moral values are always compromised. The growth of the prosperity gospel can be partly attributed to the fact that people have become more material-centred. The contemporary world directly reflects the words of Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:2, “For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy.” Such a description of people is also evident among believers, who believe in what the world values, such as money, status, and possessions. In public life, materialism has taken over, with corruption and embezzlement of funds being the new normal.

Ethical Relativism

Relativism is a belief that there is no ultimate judgment of what is right; it is determined by where you are and the circumstances around you. In other words, “many have concluded that these so-called ultimates are of only relative value. New evidence will demand revisions or even abandoning the ultimate positions they might assume. Thus, truth is most frequently relativized” (Schwarz, 1975). Furthermore, Stott remarks that “There is no sphere in which relativism is more obvious than in that of sexual ethics and sexual revolution which has taken place since the 1960s.” Traditionally, “it used to be universally accepted that marriage is a monogamous, heterosexual, loving and lifelong union and the only God-given context of sexual intimacy” (Stott, 2010). However, same-sex relationships are now widely accepted as a legal substitute for heterosexual marriage. This means the commitment required for a true marriage is no longer present.



Relativism is propagated by the belief that there is no absolute truth and ground of ethical judgment and, therefore, fronts the idea that it all depends on where you are, who you are, what you feel, how you were raised, and what is praised. In contemporary society, we continue to hear the claims that beliefs are relative and cannot be restrained by universal values. Therefore, this ignites doubt about any universal truth, beliefs, and doctrines (M & I, 2022).

Ethical relativism also emphasizes that “what is counted morally right and wrong is largely determined by cultural mores and folkways. It elucidates that morality is socially embedded, and it is only from the standpoint of cultural practices that the validity of any moral standard is judged. The theory affirms that different cultures and societies have different standards of morally right and wrong actions. It also rejects the existence of objective standards in the realm of morality because different societies have different moral standards” (Eshetu, 2017). The concern is whether this idea is worthy of acceptance by believers whose moral standards are not determined by their cultures but by the Bible.

Blamires remarks that “because Christianity is a religion of revelation of God’s will be made known in history, it follows that the keynote of Christianity must be obedience” (Blamires, 1988). No one can obey what is relative; it must be absolute. As gospel ministers, we believe and are convinced that we hold that which is absolute truth, the word of God, and there is no room for relativism in the Bible. When Jesus confesses, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6, NIV here and throughout the paper). This has no room for questioning in that you either believe it or reject it, but it will never lose its truth, and it depends on nothing to be true; thus, it shatters all relativism.

Excessive Love for Self (Narcissism and Individualism)

Narcissism is the third manifestation, according to (Stott, 2010). By definition, “Narcissism is Greek mythology of a handsome young man who caught sight of his reflection in a pond, fell in love with his image, toppled into the water, and drowned. So narcissism is an excessive love for oneself and an unbounded admiration for self.” More to this is that individualism is ultimately self-oriented. Ponderator defined it from an economic point of view as “An economic system encouraging self-production” (Ponderator, 2017). Therefore, narcissism and individualism’s ultimate motive and drive is seeking or concentrating on one’s own



advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others. This a present-day reality that is even inescapable from the church.

In the contemporary world, the level at which people are killing each other because of property and self-motivated interests is high, including in the church. A love whose object is self, self-exaltation, self-gratification, self-pity, self-righteousness, and self-reliance is inconsistent with biblical teachings. It makes human beings the center of everything, thus pushing religion to the periphery. James warns, “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice” (James 3:16). Envy can lead a person to hurt someone else to get what they want. In the political space, blackmailing, extra-judicial killings, tribal conflicts, and wars are common, all in the name of self-actualization and the urge for power and possession.

Pluralism

The fourth manifestation of secularism is pluralism. It fronts the idea that all religions are true and equal, and anyone who claims to have exclusive truth from the other religion is regarded as an extremist. Pluralism also refers to “the existence of multiple religions in a given environment. However, as a model, religious pluralism equals the belief in the coexistence of multiple religions in society, wherein each religion is accepted as legitimate and is provided equal opportunity to flourish without any form of inducement or prejudice in favor or against anyone of them by the government” (Asadu et al., 2020).

Religious and cultural pluralism claims that it is axiomatic that no one religion can claim uniqueness and finality; no religious founder can claim to be the world’s only savior. It promotes the idea of “different religious beliefs being socially accommodated in that there won’t be anything to argue about if there aren’t many differences. It also seems humbler and receptive to diverse points of view, which is probably the most alluring argument in favor of its adoption at the public level” (Rishmawy, 2014). Thus, no one can assert that their religion is better because everyone is equally right (or wrong). Since no one right religion is pitted against all the others, it is more “tolerant.” The church must avoid the temptation of compromising the exclusivity of the biblical truths. Pluralism is not new in the history of the church, “The apostolic community proclaimed the finality of Jesus Christ within a Greco-Roman world of ‘many gods and many lords’ (1 Cor 8:5)” (Flemming, n.d.). In Acts 4:12,



Peter proclaimed, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

It is noted that “multimedia communication, education, air travel, tourism, migration, and refugees have brought the world’s faith into direct dialogue and confrontation with each other, and thus, religion has become an exchangeable commodity in our free market world” (Nicholls, 1995). There is a growing rate of acceptance and embracing one another’s region in the contemporary world in the name of tolerance and dialogue. However, the church carries a mandate of evangelism, which automatically seems confrontational. Therefore, the temptation that befalls believers in the contemporary world is embracing tolerance and dialogue in pursuit of harmony and societal stability, neglecting the gospel’s proclamation.

It has been observed that religious pluralism can encourage syncretism, “Certainly, in a pluralistic society, an individual could be trapped in two divergent religious views, which amounts to a pretentious practice of religious belief, which is averred by Christianity” (Asadu et al., 2020). However, Stott advises that “against the challenge of pluralism, we are to be a community of truth, standing up for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ” (Stott, 2010), which is how Christianity remains distinct even in a religiously pluralistic society.

The Craving for Entertainment and Celebrity Status

The fifth manifestation of secularism is the entertainment and celebrity culture of “feeling cool.” Social media relieves that urge because it provides all kinds of entertainment. Social media has affected meaningful human relationships to the extent that someone might have thousands of likes/ following in online posts and thousands of Social Media friends yet be depressed. People’s aim becomes public appreciation and recognition of the urge for entertainment and celebrity life. Celebrity worship is another challenge today. It is “an increased admiration towards a famous person, which sometimes manifests in an excessive interest and devotion to celebrities” (McCutcheon et al., 2021). Celebrities are icons—they embody an image that defines what a good life is. People are tempted to uncritically aspire to that life where sex, money, beauty, power, and fame are redefined (Cosper, 2017). Such a celebrity-centered mindset and attitude is unworthy of the gospel of Christ because celebrity culture elevates worship services into rock concerts, makes pastors and worship leaders into cultural celebrities, and mixes flash and hype with substance.



Kevin DeYoung makes a comparative reflection of celebrities and heroes to awaken a desire to emulate the biblical examples of faith rather than just mere secular celebrities. He writes,

Heroes are admired for bravery, nobility, honor, and character. Celebrities are admired for their beauty and talent. Heroes grow through suffering, and we respect them for it. Celebrities flounder in dysfunction, and we are amused by it. Heroes are followed; we want to learn from them. Celebrities are feted, we want to lounge with them. Heroes make us feel unworthy when we are around them and not the best we can be. Celebrities make us feel special just to be near them. Heroes serve others with or without being noticed. Celebrities perform to be seen by others. Heroes don't look for status, recognition, or payment. Celebrities look for the cameras and lucrative compensation. Heroes desire to sacrifice for others. Celebrities enjoy others sacrificing for them. Heroes admit their faults. Celebrities flaunt their talents. Heroes deflect praise. Celebrities crave it. Heroes edify. Celebrities entertain (DeYoung, 2011).

When entertainment becomes the main priority of the church, then doctrinal truth/substance and orthodoxy are challenged, eventually replaced with false teachings meant to suit the people's desires. In so doing, pastors are lost in the false praise of congregations. Preachers become tempted to the temptation of entertaining people by preaching what suits the people's desires. After surveying how secularism manifests itself, the following section examines how the church should respond.

Missional Response of the Church

In response to the different dimensions of secularism, the body of Christ has a missional role in confronting societal evils. There is no room for escapism, neither is there room for complacency; this is because "if this is God's world and the rule of love is at work, then our mandate is not to draw into a cocoon of safety; rather, it is to be out and alive in the world" (Brueggemann, 2007). The church is always positioned to uniquely and appropriately respond to societal and circumstantial dynamics of the world as both the light and the salt and what rightly determines such a response.

A Deeper Conviction about Scripture

God, in his wisdom and grace, at various times and in multiple ways, revealed himself, declaring his will, preserved and proclaimed his truth, and protected the church against corruption and the deceits of Satan. The people of God in all generations have always been



built up, edified, and guided by the scriptures; their lives have always been inseparable from the binding instructions of scripture; in other words, the Bible is the unchanging truth in the changing world. Knowledge of the Bible and theology is essential to confront contemporary issues (Mead, 2007). When the conviction of scriptural becomes the center of all Church ministry, materialism will be overwhelmed by the contentment that the truth of God’s word offers and demands.

The word of God distinguishes Christianity from other kinds of faith, thus addressing religious pluralism. The word of God points people to Christ and, therefore, demolishes the self. Instead of celebrity culture, it challenges believers to follow Christ, which includes emptying self and following Christ obediently. The Bible’s message is relevant to every generation, “addressing every age and era with immediacy and urgency” (Kuruville, 2015). The Bible is infallible and inerrant accurate and inspires believers with confidence rather than skepticism, despair, or uncertainty. The appropriate response of the church in the contemporary secular world will always be defined by her submission and dependence on the word of God; “For throughout the scripture, God is addressing his people teaching them his way and appealing to them both for his sake and theirs to hear and heed his message” (Stott, 2014).

A Call to be Gospel Centred

Another determinant of appropriate response to secularism is when the church goes back to the basics of Christianity. The gospel is “the church’s most precious gift to cherish, protect, and pass on. Christians, particularly preachers, must never stop checking what they believe and preach (Maura et al., 2015).

Gilbert defines the gospel using Apostle Paul’s arguments in the book of Romans chapters 1—4: “We can see that, at the heart of his proclamation of the gospel are the answers to four crucial questions: who made us and to whom are we accountable? What is our problem? What is God’s solution to that problem, and how can I be included in that salvation? (Gilbert, 2010). In other words, the four main aspects are God, humanity, Christ, and response. The fundamental truth is that God created man without sin and in His image. Man chose to fall into sin, earning himself the wrath of God. However, in God’s kindness, salvation is offered to every lost and sinful individual for free and requires nothing more than faith in Jesus Christ. The highlight of the gospel is Christ. Unlike the pluralistic world, the



gospel presents the salvation of humankind exclusively in Christ alone and by faith alone. As many other world religions toil to find their way to God, the gospel presents the God who comes to rescue human beings.

However, the prosperity gospel, as a teaching based on secular materialism, goes one step further in robbing God of his glory by leading its followers away from Christ's sufficiency. Instead of focusing solely on Christ, prosperity preachers promote various ways to get blessings, including anointing oil, planting a seed, holy water, and prayers from the man of God. By asserting that rituals and people can get blessings from God apart from Christ Jesus, this false gospel minimizes the sufficiency of Christ. Therefore, gospel centrality is not only in proclamation but also demonstrated by the church as God's new society in the world and as the particular living embodiment of the gospel. "In other words, God's purpose in the good news of Jesus Christ is set forth visually and as well as verbally" (Stott, 2007).

Gospel centrality is always exclusive to the world of pluralism and relativism. The temptation to the church has always been not to appear complete and, thus, accommodative. This has always been a threat to the gospel, for it entails all forms of compromise either by leaning on worldly standards or failing to dwell and present the gospel actually and exclusively. The gospel is confrontational and demanding, for it is a Christ-centric message presenting Christ as the Savior and the Lord over all.

Therefore, the Great Commission in Mathew 28:18–20 is not just a mere suggestion to the church but a commandment to obey. Believers in the contemporary world have nothing else to present apart from the love of the risen Christ and the ultimate truth and Savior of the world, both in word and deed. The appropriate response of the church to the secular world can only be grounded and defined by the gospel. When believers live out the gospel and cling to it as the only saving message, they are built up in the likeness of Christ and their missional mandate in the world they live in.

The church's relevance in the world has always been gospel centrality. When the church departs from the gospel, it loses its influence and impact on the world, thus turning to human philosophical teachings based on emotions and materialistic intentions. Dever summarizes that "the message of Jesus Christ is about teaching us to live with a transforming longing, with a growing faith, with a sure and certain hope of what's to come" (Dever, 2013). Therefore, the church is to proclaim the gospel and embody it.



The Uniqueness of the Church and Its Mission

One of the influences of secularism on society is a decline in the interest and commitment of people to the church. The church is not esteemed because God is not given appropriate reverence. Social gatherings such as cinemas, watching and playing football, and clubbing attract more young people than the church (M & I, 2022).

When believers live their lives based on the word of God as the ultimate and binding truth, the uniqueness of their identity and mission in the world that fights ultimates becomes inevitable. This helps believers to know their unique calling and identity in the world of religious pluralism. Their unique identity in Christ informs their deep longing and desire to follow Christ and, thus, demolishes the materialistic attitudes of the contemporary world. When believers are convinced about the source of their true identity as the body of Christ/ the church, celebrity worship is automatically shattered, living wholesomely for the glory of God.

Missions should naturally flow in the life of the church, “Missions is not an imposition upon the church, for it belongs to her nature and should be as natural to her as grapes are natural to branches that abide in the vine. Missions flow from the inner constitution, character, calling, and design of the church” (Peters, 1972). The church should show forth the virtues of him who called her out of darkness into his marvelous light (2 Peter 2:9).

In his book *The Mission of God’s People*, Christopher Wright fronts two crucial questions that every believer has to answer: “Who are we, and what are we here for?” (Wright, 2010). These two questions prompt believers to evaluate their understanding of their identity and mission in the world. If these two realities are grasped, the church serves its missional purpose by understanding the uniqueness of its identity and mission. However, if this understanding is not attained, the church will remain in the darkness of an identity crisis and a failed mission. Thus, believers should uphold the uniqueness of the church and its mission if they are to minister and be ambassadors of God in the fallen world.

The Bible should be properly interpreted and applied. Sadly, the Bible is increasingly used as a template of prosperity, fame, and promotion of “Men of God.” At the same time, the real gospel call for repentance and obedience to the Lordship of Christ has been neglected. If this is not checked, the mission of God’s people will not manifest anywhere, for people who do not know their identity cannot know their mission; “The local church must understand



itself and organize itself accordingly, and it must articulate its message to the world” (Stott, 2007). For a church’s authentic and unique identity and mission to be realized, “there must be a recognition that the Great Commission that the Lord Jesus Christ gave his disciples was not only for them but also for us today. We are not at the end of the process but are right in the midst of it” (Mbewe, 2020). The church is the distinct body of Christ and an embodiment of the gospel message. Its identity and mission are uniquely defined not by cultural consciousness, pluralism, peaceful coexistence, or any other societal determinants but by the ultimate and exclusive truth in the scripture.

Conclusion

This study examined the missional response to the rise of secularism and its manifestations in contemporary Africa. The manifestations of secularism discussed include materialism, ethical relativism, excessive love for self, pluralism, entertainment, and celebrity culture. The church has a missional role in the world, a responsibility Jesus gives his disciples to be the salt and light of the world. The church must live its identity, appropriately respond based on conviction of Scripture and gospel-centered message, and have deep confidence in its uniqueness and role in the world. Therefore, the missional response of the church involves reclaiming true reverence and worship of God.

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