

## SECULARISM

# Nigerian Islam vs secularism

## The concept of secularism

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### Introduction

Since the rude awakening of 11 September 2001, or, as it is now popularly referred to as “9/11,” Islam as a phenomenon has received much attention in the non-Muslim world. Certain aspects of Islam as religion and as ideology have also come to the fore, inter alia the possible link between Islam and terrorism. Another aspect that has been highlighted is the attitude of Islam to secularism – the subject of this brief series of short articles.

Most writings on Islam by non-Muslims since 9/11 deal with Asian Islam. Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq, Indonesia – these countries are the attention grabbers. If African Islam is of any interest at all, Egypt or Sudan usually come to mind – or Libya with its mercurial Ghadafi. However, this article deals with Nigeria, a country with a number of both Christians and Muslims, some 50 million or more of each. Too many people bypass this home of two very dynamic religious communities whose relationships and interplay can justly be regarded as a showcase of future relationships in other countries – a not-so encouraging showcase, I should hasten to add.

There are various reasons why South African Christians should be concerned with the issue of secularism in Nigeria. The two countries are vying with each other for leadership in Africa and both are aggressively lining up to do business with each other. This means that Christians among South Africa’s business people and

politicians have a heavy responsibility to demonstrate practical Christianity to the large Nigerian Muslim community.

**Secularism is *the* major issue that divides Nigerian Christians and Muslims**

Secularism is *the* major issue that divides Nigerian Christians and Muslims. Muslims reject secularism with a passion and regard it as the product of satan himself, while Christians uphold it with equal passion as *the* solution to Nigeria’s inter-religious problems. Like Nigerian Muslims, and contrary to their Nigerian counterparts, some leading Christians in South Africa reject secularism as their “most dangerous enemy,” as Prof. Bennie van der Walt put it some time ago in the title of an article. How can there be such a total contrast between these two groups of Christians and such a convergence between Nigerian Muslims and South African Christians on such an important issue? Obviously, everyone is going to be in for a big surprise once they begin meeting for political or business purposes. This short series of articles will hopefully help South African Christians to understand the Nigerian situation.

The Muslim critique of secularism presents a challenge to Christians with their easy flirtation with secularism. It should lead Nigerian Christians especially to a very serious inward look: On what basis can Nigerians defend their insistence on secularism as the key to their problems with Muslims? And that question, of course,

leads us one step further back into the history of missions and missionaries from which Nigerian Christians at least partially inherited their worldview. These missionaries include South Africans who have been involved in the development of at least two Nigerian churches.

In this article many quotes from Nigerian Muslims will be found; the voices of Nigerians themselves will be heard. English is not the mother tongue of many of these writers – they would probably formulate better in Hausa or Arabic, but then we would not understand. So, despite the limitations of their English, I have consciously adopted the quotation style for such discussions. I want the outside world to hear them speak with their own passion, indignation, frustration and anger. They can express all that much more effectively than an outsider can.

Of course, I side unequivocally with Nigerian Christians in their struggle for a place in the Nigerian sun and disapprove strongly of the continued Muslim attempts to dominate Nigeria. At the same time, I sympathize with important aspects of the Muslim perspective. Along with them, I abhor both imperialism and secularism. Extensive immersion in Muslim literature has enabled me to practise some empathy that allows me to make some of their passion my own. May this brief series of articles similarly enable you to move from outright hostility, sometimes so common of Christians everywhere, to a degree of empathy. Such an attitude will not only bring you to a closer empathic understanding of the Nigerian situation, but also of the entire global Muslim *ummah*, including those associated with 9/11, for the Nigerian Muslim community is a microcosm of the international scene. It may help our governments to redirect their long-term anti-terrorist strategies from guns and bombs to more serious attention to and respect for religions and their role, both Christian and Muslim. Empathy, of course, is an aid to understanding, but not a synonym for agreement.

### **The nature of secularism**

The way in which secularism is described by Muslims varies, but one consistently meets strong resistance to it across the

board. Secularism is almost invariably seen as negative.

Bola Ige, until his recent assassination Federal Minister of Justice, a lawyer and a Christian member of the Constituent Assembly of the 1970s, reported that when the issue of secularism was raised in the Assembly, "... our Muslim colleagues ... raised objections saying, 'A secular state is a godless state.' And in spite of the hot debate the members ... had on this, the word 'secular' had to be deleted in the draft before we submitted our report to the Nation." A dual Muslim concern was obvious: the deletion of the term "secularism" and the inclusion of the sharia. The battle around this dual concern, according to Ige, almost broke up the Assembly. It took them two days to forge a draft on these issues and even then the Assembly was "unable to announce its approval or non-approval" of the issue until it was forced by a deadline to report. It was and has remained the hottest issue in the country ever since, with neither side prepared to compromise toward a mutually acceptable solution. That compromises that have been made are not mutually acceptable are illustrated by Ige's article on religious freedom within the frameworks of the Nigerian Constitution.

In a newspaper article the late Abubakar Gumi, Nigeria's only recipient of the King Feisal Award, the Muslim equivalent to the Nobel Prize, who caused much fermentation in the Muslim community describes the secular state as "an atheistic state". Similarly Juma'atul Nasril Islam (JNI), the largest Nigerian Muslim umbrella organization, regards it a secular state – "a system of social teachings or organisation which allows no part for religion".

Ibraheem Sulaiman describes the "secular attitude" in his article on national rebirth as one that "tends to ignore all matters pertaining to God and seeks to build a system of life and an attitude of mind that is distrustful of God". In another context, and dealing with Islam, secularism and Nigeria, he writes, "Secularism is simply an attempt to run a society on a basis other than religion ..."

Musa Sulaiman describes secularism as an attempt "to reconstruct society without reference to God or future life. The

emphasis is primarily on one's happiness in this material world". One of the main objectives of the secular state is seen as the "deconsecration of values by rendering morality relative and questionable". Secularism promotes the "desacralization of politics", a fancy term for the separation of politics and religion. Sulaiman ends his discussion by concluding that "virtually every sector of our life is being secularized ..." (see Musa Sulaiman's publication *On the political future*).

The list of quotations can go on almost endlessly. Ibrahim Umar's article on Islamic liberal democracy alleges that Western liberal democracy has secularism as its ideological foundation, by which he means the "separation of religion from other vital aspects of life, like politics and economics". In an article written by Awwal Hamisu Yadudu he puts it this way:

"Secularism or secularization of society and its institutions is a political arrangement which is predicated on the twin understanding that (a) there shall be a separation between church and state and (b) that religion shall have no relevance and must of necessity be confined only to the private life of individuals. Consequently, public affairs shall in no way be influenced by religion".

In an article on Islam in Nigeria and dealing with its perceptions and practices, Bidmos concludes that secularism was "developed to replace religion and also to provide man with alternative principles that govern his daily routines". He continues, "... a secular country runs its affairs absolutely without any religious considerations. All religious practices in a secular society are conducted privately".

Husaini Hassan also scrutinizes the relation between Islam and the modern secular society and views the essence of secularism to be the separation of church and state. It divides life into two compartments. In the one, the church, spiritual and moral forces dominate. In the state, policies rest on the power of security institutions.

In a paper delivered in 1989 El-Miskin suggests that the perspective of secularism includes the assumption that the "secular" and the "religious" aspects of life

exist separately. This assumption, in fact, "is pivotal to the secular alternatives promoted in the Muslim world". Secularism separates concerns of "other-worldliness" from "the goodness of this life". This world has nothing to do with the hereafter.

As indicated in previous publications, I highlighted the fact that the Nigerian Muslim discussion on secularism started during the Constituent Assembly of the 1970s. The quotations in the previous section stem from that era. When the governor of Zamfara State in 1999 announced his intention of making the sharia, the Muslim law, the basis of his state's constitution, the discussion revived all over again and often turned into a rancorous and bitter affair between the two religions. However, the Muslim attitude towards secularism has not changed. Their opposition to it remains as adamant as before. There are signs, however, that this bitterness has increased, due to a sense that they are losing control to a growing Christian community that is flexing its political muscle more than before.

**Over against the objections of Christians who argue that the sharia is intolerant of non-Muslims, Muslims brush secularism with the same tar**

Secularism is now also seen as intolerant. Over against the objections of Christians who argue that the sharia is intolerant of non-Muslims, Muslims brush secularism with the same tar. Ibrahim Suleiman, an eloquent Muslim spokesman whom we have already met earlier in this article, argued against secularism in favour of both the sharia and pluralism. "The only way to guarantee that different groups have what they want is to encourage pluralism and provide alternatives. But the secular elements [read: Christians] in this country are, blindly and arrogantly insisting that everybody must live according to their only way and all must be forced to drink from the same cup. The danger of colonialism and secularism is that everybody is forced and programmed to think and behave in one and the same

way, with no tolerance to alternative view points”.

The very next day after the above-mentioned comments by Suleiman had been published, the same newspaper featured a lecture by another prominent Muslim authority, Justice Muhammed Bashir Sambo. His comments were fully representative of both Nigerian mainstream Islam as well as of fundamentalism. He criticized those who opposed the further entrenchment of sharia in the country's court system and claimed that they were doing so on the basis of a wrong interpretation of the constitution. According to Sambo they argued that the constitution declares Nigeria a secular country that thereby prohibits adopting a state religion. Nigeria, declared Sambo, is not a secular state but is multi-religious. “The wrong use of secular status for Nigeria has been constantly used especially by the Christians to deny the Muslims their fundamental right of having sharia as an instrument of law to govern their lives.”

Things are even worse than that as far as Sambo is concerned. According to him, not only is the Christian secular interpretation of the constitution wrong, it is a trick. He demands that “this trick to deny the Muslims their fundamental rights must stop”. And stop it will, he warns, for Nigerian Muslims have woken up from their colonial slumber. Sambo emphasizes that Muslims “have once again discovered their fundamental rights ... and, God willing, there will be no going back from these ... rights”.

### **Christian secular emphasis**

According to T. El-Miskin, secularism is the reason for “the absence of an elaborate political and economic thought in Christianity meant to be applied to worldly governance”. Indeed, compared to Nigerian Islamic literature that boasts of many books and articles elaborately outlining aspects of Muslim political and economic thought, Nigerian Christianity seems to be singularly poverty-stricken. It is a highly regrettable situation that the Christian testimony Nigerian Muslims confront is largely shorn of contributions in these areas, except in secular garb. Religion, Nigerian Christianity consistently pro-

claims, is private and personal. It has nothing unique to say about these major areas of culture. And so Muslims conclude that this is the situation with Christianity in general the world over.

Most missionaries in Nigeria from more holistic traditions such as the Reformed and the Roman Catholic have not helped the situation either. They have seldom accorded priority to sharing the holistic aspects of their traditions with Nigerians. That was never part of their assignment. Where it did happen, it was more a matter of personal predilection that received little encouragement from their home offices. Thus Muslims have been left to draw their own conclusion: Christianity does not have it! As a result, Muslims tend to see Christianity as a trivial religion with little or nothing to offer to Nigeria.

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Today, Nigeria finds itself in a tragic and bloody struggle between the two religions. Muslims proudly parade their religion as the solution to the country's problems. Their religion, they proclaim time and again, is not merely a religion; it is a total way of life. It finds itself frustrated at every front by an impoverished, reduced and trivialized Christian religion that constantly waves the secular flag. But that, according to Muslims, was the very weapon the colonialists employed to undermine Islam in its deepest core. How can they possibly make peace with that?

I am far from suggesting that Muslims would not try to dominate if Christians followed a more holistic approach, or that Nigeria would then be a peaceful country. It is not that simple. I am not even suggesting that Christians are unilaterally responsible for the problems of Nigeria – or even primarily. But I *am* saying that waving the secular flag guarantees that the bloody battle will continue until one or the other is vanquished. A red flag is a

guarantee for an enraged bull; a secular flag is a guarantee for an enraged Islam. And a secular people among Muslims are perceived as a bull in a china shop. That is definitely *not* the way to peace.

## Summary

**Muslims regard secularism as promoting an exclusive concentration on the material at the expense of the spiritual. A religion that gives in to this attitude is doomed to trivialization – as has happened to Christianity, according to Muslims**

It is clear from the above that for Muslims secularism is totally negative and has no redeeming features of any kind. According to Muslim perceptions, secularism stands for godlessness and atheism, ignores God, is mistrustful of Him

and leads to social organization that omits God and marginalizes spiritual and religious concerns from the marketplace. Muslims regard secularism as promoting an exclusive concentration on the material at the expense of the spiritual. A religion that gives in to this attitude is doomed to trivialization – as has happened to Christianity, according to Muslims. It is reduced to the sphere of the personal and private, while it has no concern for the structural aspects of society. Furthermore it negates everything that Muslims are proud of in their religion, and is even used as a weapon against the re-introduction of the sharia into national life. The latter is achieved through the misinterpretation of the constitution and through trickery. Serious Muslims will have no truck with it. Advocating secularism is a guarantee that neither Nigeria nor the world as a whole will find peace.