

**Is Secularism a Mystical Religion?
Questions of Translation in Relation to
Millennium Goals and Mission in Africa**

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Beyerhaus warns us that millennium goals should not distract us from our evangelical objectives.¹ I want to agree with him. But how I can justify giving anything but full support to a project that intends to solve the problem of poverty? Could it be that the moral high ground claimed by MDP (Millennium Development Project) perpetrators is at some point less than honest? It seems so convincing. Where is the Achilles heel?

Logically, because everyone having enough to eat is a good idea, and because the MDP aims to provide everyone with enough to eat, it must be a good thing. But an important question is *how* the goals to be achieved? Can the goals be achieved without adverse side-effects and compromises.²

The achievement of millennium goals is rooted in massive resource transfers. Is this the only way to bring about helpful change? What of Christian mission? Can Christians silently swallow such an insidious narrowing of options? Why has massive investment been chosen as 'today's option' in dealing with the problems of the world? Have those who have in the past seen it differently been misguided? Why is there still so much hunger in the world, given the major efforts made over decades by the wealthy nations of the world to end it through resource transfers? Are we as Christians automatically to fall on the side of those who advocate the achieving of such materialist objectives? Are our resources best used in backing these goals? The implementation of millennium goals is rooted in secularism. Arising from the United Nations it cannot be otherwise. What are the implications of this?

Some Questions of Translation

Most residents of the Third World are non-native English speakers. The ways in which they use English clearly cannot be the same as British or American use. For many people around the world:

- a. English words and concepts are an implicit translation of words from their own language and culture.
- b. Speakers assume that they are being overheard by departed predecessors who often have harmful intent (evil spirits, gods etc.).
- c. Words are considered to have inherent power.

¹ Parker, David, 2005, 'Missiologist: Do Not Replace Mission With Dialogue: Millennium Development Goal Not Well-Founded In the Bible' in *WEA Theological News On-Line 'Promoting Biblical Truth by Networking Theologians'* Issue 40 September 2005 Published by Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance

² The Millennium Goals are: 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. 2. Achieve universal primary education. 3. Promote gender equality and empower women. 4. Reduce child mortality. 5. Improve maternal health. 6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. 7. Ensure environmental sustainability. 8. Develop a global partnership for development. (Millennium. 2007. 'Millennium Development Goals.' <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/goals.html> (accessed 18.10.07))

As a result, the use of a mutual language without a mutual culture does not bring mutual understanding.³ Allow me to demonstrate this in practice by looking at ‘secularism’ as a foundation-stone of development practices. I here take ‘secularism’ as being a ‘faith’ or religion. After all, religion for African people is their way of life,⁴ and as secularism claims to be a way of life, it appears it ought to belong in the category of ‘religion’.

Secularism and the Development Theory Underlying the Millennium Goals

Claiming to bring ‘development’ has given secularists an ace card in their conversion of those non-Western people (certainly many in Africa) whose holistic orientation to life has them considering that success in religion (life) is measured through someone’s material prosperity. Hence aspects of secularism have been appropriated by many other world (and local) religions.

Secularism so defines itself to the West as to stand aloof from other world ‘religions’. The material wealth that it (apparently) generates gives it a platform for its ascendancy. Its presupposing its own ascendancy justifies, to its adherents, its being used as the standard for evaluation of competing faiths.

Knowing secularism’s weaknesses does not appear to stop its spread. It has often been said to be foundation less, meaningless, without hope, without eternal purpose and reducing human existence to an animal-like (by comparison with many faiths⁵) consumerist façade.⁶ Yet, its spread appears to continue. ‘What would Christ do’, or is he doing in response to these apparently idolatrous claims?⁷

Secularism as Chameleon

Doubtlessly ‘secularism’ is rooted in Western history and philosophy. Along with terms such as ‘modern’, ‘age of reason’ and ‘enlightenment’, it has arisen as a result of a certain developments in Western thought. What happens to a word that has arisen within the milieu of one language and people, if it then tries to move to another? It would seem obvious that the word’s impact must be transformed, as are the impacts of all words on being applied to a different culture. A dangerous cat is by an Indian considered to be a tiger, but by an African a lion. A shoe is everyday footwear to a German craftsman, but seen as an unwanted luxury to a Maasai herdsman. Polygamy is an affront to a typical Brit., but ‘normal’ to an African elder. Dreaming of wealth may make an American think of a world cruise, but an Indian Hindu a set of good rice meals. What then is the impact of the term ‘secularism’ in Africa?⁸

³ In drawing this conclusions I draw heavily on pragmatics; the study of language and how it is used. For example see LEECH, GEOFFREY H., 1983, *Principles of Pragmatics*. London and New York: Longman

⁴ Mbiti, John S., 1969, *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann. p2.

⁵ As for religion above, secularists like to think that while others hold to their belief by faith, secularists do not. I do not see the basis for this, so here take secularism as being as much a faith as any other.

⁶ PLANTINGA, ALVIN, 1983, 'Reason and Belief in God.' 16-93 In: Plantinga, A., and Wolterstorff N., (eds) *Faith and rationality: reason and belief in God*. London: University of Notre Dame Press, p62.

⁷ The genius of secularism is of course that it defines itself as non-religious, thus attempting to dodge such once powerful and piercing critiques of ‘idolatry’.

⁸ Comaroff and Comaroff have studied the impact of ‘modernity’ on Africa in a similar vein. COMAROFF, JEAN and COMAROFF, JOHN L., 2004, 'Notes on Afro-modernity and the Neo World Order: an after-word.' 329-347 In: Weiss, Brad, (ed.) 2004, *Producing African Futures: ritual and reproduction in a neo liberal age*. London.Boston: Brill

Let's consider a Sub-Saharan African perspective. It could be identified with the origin of wealth, as an African person will often hear it used in the context of bringing wealth. It could be seen to be God himself, as much power is ascribed to it. It appears to hold something of the key to the White man's power. It may be an amorphous and incongruous entity, akin to 'the mysterious/vital force' of life.⁹ Sometimes it is considered as if it is 'the devil', being blamed for today's ills. Yet there must be a pattern to its use. Secularism cannot be nothing at all.

The ancestors of many of the peoples who populate the world today did not participate in the enlightenment. The age of reason and rise of rationalism in Europe came and went unnoticed. For many people in the world, presuppositions associated with these 'pivotal' historical periods, are strangers. When we look at the ways of life of people who have not gone through these epochs, we find them to be 'holistic'. That is, for them the spiritual and the physical intermingle in ways that are hard for Europeans to grasp. 'Religion' rules the day,¹⁰ amongst such people. They do not distinguish the 'religious' from the 'secular'. So secularism cannot mean to them what it does to people of European stock!

Whereas dominant religions are rooted in written (or oral) histories founded in divine revelation, secularism has no such foundation. Secularism's failure to identify itself with conventional 'religious language', be it of angels, gods, spirits, supernormal heroes of the past or ghosts, results in its being found by many to be particularly obscure.¹¹ The most carefully worded definitions in Western tongues remain shrouded in murky European history.¹² Hence we must allow two broad definitions for secularism:

1. Something akin to 'materialism', for the West.
2. Something akin to 'mysticism', for the non-West (those people with a 'holistic worldview').

But if there are two broad definitions for 'secularism' then either I must now make my target audience clear (either Western or non-Western),¹³ or if I attempt to communicate with both using one text, then surely I need to use two words instead of one? Hence I invent the term *sekusm*, which is secularism as found outside of the West. I could call this secular mysticism or mystical secularism. This would be misleading, because it would imply that non-Western mystics have incorporated something from secularism into their understanding of mysticism, which is not the case because they cannot know what secularism (as known by the Westerner) is.¹⁴ This is not a secularisation of mysticism, or a mystification of secularism, but must for scholarly purposes be understood as something new and original.¹⁵

But if secularism cannot be translated, what of other words? How can one word be redefined in isolation without consideration of the rest of the English language? While use of the term *sekusm* may clear some confusion with 'secularism', what of the terms *philosophy*, *Western*,

⁹ Tempels, Placide, 1959, *Bantu Philosophy*. Paris: Presence Africaine (44)

¹⁰ Although it is wrong to use the label 'religion' because in modern Britain religion seems to be used to classify aspects of life in respect to secularism.

¹¹ People whose worldview is holistic invariably consider secularism as being mystical in origin.

¹² Word uses and meanings in Europe having arisen from a peculiar European history means that they are not clear to those unfamiliar with that history or the culture that has arisen from it.

¹³ This is because if I do not make it clear, then I open my paper to two broad interpretational schemes, Western and non-Western. The question will then arise as to which is the 'correct' or the 'intended' one? It is impossible for one text to be interpreted in the same way by people from widely different cultures.

¹⁴ The reason they cannot know what secularism is should be clear from the above. Secularism being rooted in Western history, culture and language, how can a person who does not share these things understand that which derives from them?

¹⁵ Hence, as also alluded to above, translation is invention.

history, force, religion (as already mentioned above), *mysticism* and then every other word that I have already used in this essay!¹⁶ How can I be sure that my words have an impact for readers emerging from the non-West that is functionally equivalent to that of those who are Westerners? Of course I cannot be sure. It would seem that I must make it clear that I am writing to Westerners, that I include what is to me a non-Western ‘definition’ of just one word in the interests of clear understanding, and then I must ask non-Western readers to bear in mind that they are over-hearers to the rest of this conversation.¹⁷ Then, as is often the case with over-hearers in a conversation not meant for them, I must assume that ‘non-Westerners’ are unlikely to grasp and may misconstrue much of what I am saying.

Can this same Chameleon status be ascribed to Christianity or other ‘traditional’ religions? I think the answer is yes and no. Certainly Christianity in the UK has a ring of history, morality, tradition, and staidness, whereas my understanding of ‘Christian’ in East Africa tells me about knowledge of English, education, a Christian name, wearing clothes and so on. But the roots of Christianity are not in these things. Few scholars would deny that its origin and foundation are in faith in God, and a particular understanding of his nature. This is what has enabled Christianity to become a world religion, and to have one foundation globally. The lack of such roots causes secularism to change as it does. Secularism being built on the back of a pre-existing structure (in fact the Christian West) could be termed a ‘sponger religion’.¹⁸ This means if moved to where that structure is absent it becomes *sekusm*, which has its foundation in primal soil.¹⁹

We see that secularism is not well suited to being a missionary religion. It is a jellyfish – fascinating, intricate, complex and powerful, but totally dependent on water (i.e. Western language and culture) for its structure and existence. Christ, on the other hand, refused to be a ‘worldly’ King (John 18:33-37). Laying the foundation of Christianity in the heavenly realms (i.e. heartfelt human universals)²⁰ has enabled Christianity to grow and thrive in diverse cultures.²¹

¹⁶ All these terms are clearly used differently by non-Western than by Western people.

¹⁷ Over-hearers are those listening to a conversation that is not intended for them. Such must be aware that conversants are likely to be assuming knowledge that is critical to the gaining of full understanding, of which they are unaware.

¹⁸ Instead of ‘sponger religion’ I could use ‘secondary religion’, ‘free-rider religion’ etc. Secularism as I understand it has piggy-backed on Christianity.

¹⁹ As also some objects acquire their identity from their position. For example, if I lift a piece of wood and lay it over the top of an empty bottle, then it has become a bottle cover. If I put it back onto the ground, then it can no longer be referred to as a bottle cover. A rucksack also acquires its name from how it is carried. If I cut off the straps from a rucksack, it could be referred to as a rucksack without straps, but to be more accurate it would have to be admitted that it is no longer a rucksack because a rucksack is a bag that can be carried on one’s back. Secularism is a rucksack being carried on someone’s back (on the back of Western Christianity), whereas *sekusm* has been left on the floor through lack of functional straps.

²⁰ Although ‘heaven’ is in many languages identified with ‘up’ or ‘the sky’, its nature is linked to the desires of the human heart. It has often struck me that the Luo people in Kenya are ‘heart-led’ in their lives. In fact, I doubt that this only applies to the Luo. Other peoples are also guided in their lives by the orientation of their hearts. In fact such desires for peace, love, relationship and meaning would seem to be a human universal. I suggest that this is the foundation by which the lives of people around the world are guided. If so, then we can expect that which speaks to peoples hearts to be that which guides them. This is the nature of ‘religions’. The failure of secularism to connect to the heart makes it a secondary religion. It leaves a space for a primary religion to fill, but then by implication remains dependent for its own form on the particular nature of that religion.

²¹ I here add some thoughts regarding the link between ‘heaven’ and ‘heart’ that are a little peripheral to the main flow of this essay. There seems to have been confusion in the West between the metaphorical ‘up’ of heaven and the geographical ‘up’ of the sky. Hence the failure of astronauts to ‘see God’ has caused some to change their faith. In other words, the failure to locate God or gods using the tools of science has caused many to despair. I suggest that we recognize the true ‘objective foundation’ to human life as being in the human heart. It is through

This is why the spread of secularism (often deceptively identified with ‘development’ and ‘progress’) is dependence-creating. While powerful Western ‘secular’ economies have spread its *products*, secularism itself cannot move across culturally boundaries. What we see is *sekusm*. A suitable ground must first be prepared for it. Otherwise what spreads is dependence. Hence proselytism of secularism beyond the Western world can be considered immoral.

Another view of the Millennium Projects

The MDP is building on secularism. That is, it is rooted not in spiritual reality, but in materialist pretext. While its founding positivist philosophies make sense in Western English, they become *sekusm* (a kind of mysticism) in non-Westerner cultures. Means of fulfilling millennium goals are only going to be clearly decipherable to Western people. Expecting others to invest in the achievement of these goals is not a ‘pulling together’ with them, but asking them to stretch yet further their faith in the abilities of the West. Western man will do this ‘for them’. In other words, it is ‘dependence creating’.

Christians need not get excited about claims to such exclusive means to achieve elusive goals. Our faith in Christ is not rooted in particular languages and a particular age. It is universal, and for all. Let’s not take our eyes from the Gospel. Knowing Christ enables people to value and believe in themselves. Feeding someone through *sekusm* (‘mysticism’), leaves them dependent. Let’s help people come to faith in God, and thus to love one another and build Christian community. Christians have more to offer than do MDPs.

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its linking to the human heart that Christianity has become a world religion. It is through its clear communication to the human heart that it expresses the truth of God, who is a heart (spiritual) being. The reason that secularism has no foundation, is because it does not link to the heart of man, but to a structure already built onto the heart, typically some products of Western Christianity.