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SECULARISATION IN AFRICA: A CHALLENGE FOR THE CHURCHES[1]

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Evangelicals have not reflected on the question of secularisation in Africa. Dr. Benno van den Toren opens up this category of Christian reflection. The author notes that in modern cities large spheres of life have no link with personal religious values. Religious convictions are relegated to private sphere. The urban rich, those who think of themselves as intellectuals, successful or "educated," live most of their lives without their religion except when sickness or disaster strikes. Some turn to traditional healers or diviners. Consumerism and capitalism is readily accepted which leads to a form of idolatry. For some, religious practices serve secular goals. This article addresses ways the church should respond to this pervading process of secularism.

Introduction: The Problem and the Definition

At first sight the title of this article may seem inappropriate. Is secularisation not a problem characteristic of Europe and North America rather than Africa? Isn't the African "notoriously religious", as John Mbiti

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[1] This article has grown out of an interdisciplinary course on "La sécularisation en Afrique comme défi pour l'église" for graduate students at the Bangui Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (BEST or Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui - FATEB) in the Central African Republic. I want to thank both my colleagues and the students who participated in this course for their many contributions. I equally want to express my thanks to the administration of Regent College in Vancouver (Canada), who kindly received me as a Scholar-in-Residence during the academic year, thus offering the conditions to write this article. I am thankful to Geoffrey Chapman from Johannesburg who helped me to write in his mother tongue and who was able to share his experiences of secularisation in South Africa, which confirmed the urgency of these issues.

said some decades ago and as Laurenti Magesa repeated only recently?[2] Isn't the problem for the African churches predominantly the tendency towards syncretism, the mixing of African Traditional Religion (ATR) with the Christian faith? The main thesis of this article is that disregarding the secularising forces in contemporary Africa greatly weakens the witness and presence of its churches, and that a balanced theological appreciation of these forces is greatly needed to determine in what direction to look for healthy responses and action. This is the case not only because the pervasive assumption that "*the* African [who is he or she?] is incurably religious" has an ethnicist bias, and presupposes too close a link between religion and ethnic identity; it is also the case because this perspective neglects the realities of contemporary Africa.

According to a 1986-survey in the low-income area of Eastleigh in Nairobi, on an average Sunday only 2,5% of the population attend a worship service.[3] This of course does not mean that the others never go to church or do not consider themselves Christian. Yet it does mean that at least on average their Christian faith is not so important that they feel the need to express it in worship, to seek Christian community and to be comforted and challenged through the preaching of the Word of God on a regular basis. "Eastleigh, for its many churches and worship centres, is a secular place and organized religion is superfluous to the lives of many of the self-employed."[4] In Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, complaints that I hear from students and pastors show that here it is not so much the poor as the rich who tend to push their faith to the margins of their lives. Although I do not have any precise statistics on the matter, it seems that many go to church when they are in need, but when they enter into the more affluent constituencies of society they no longer feel the need for church attendance. Pastoral visits then show that this is part of a more general process pushing their faith to the margins of their lives.

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[2] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London e.a.: Heinemann, 1969), p. 1; Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997), pp. 25f.

[3] Aylward Shorter & Edwin Onyancha, *Secularism in Africa: A Case Study: Nairobi* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1997), p. 58.

[4] Ibid., p. 59.

However, the diminishing impact of the Christian faith in individual lives and in society is not necessarily secularisation, for this decreasing influence could also be the result of a radical or partial return to ATR or of a growing influence of other religions like Islam. To be able to speak validly about secularisation, we need to see "impersonal and gradual processes whereby religion or the church played a diminishing role, or vanished entirely, from spheres of life where previously they had been influential."[5] For the moment this will do as a definition of secularisation as a sociological category. A conversion from one religion to another or the diminishing influence of one religion because of the growing impact of another religion does not count as secularisation. The broad tendency in both African Christianity and African Islam to syncretism does not count as secularisation. To speak about secularisation we need to see a diminishing influence of religion in general. This of course raises major theological questions. Can a human being really do without religion or is there always something that takes the place of God, be it our money (Matthew 6:24),[6] our stomach (Philippians 3:19) or an ideology, like Marxism? Maybe not, and I therefore suggest that we define secularisation not as a movement towards the absence of any "gods" or "idols", but in a more limited sense as the tendency to live all of life or parts of life without reference to a "transcendent" or "supernatural reality".[7]

In what follows we will make some observations and reflections about the challenge of secularisation for the church in Africa in four parts. In the following section (§2), we want to look into the varied forms of secularisation in Africa, in which we limit ourselves to Africa south of the Sahara. We will see how secularisation in Africa is part of the wider

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[5] Hugh McLeod, "Secularization", in: Adrian Hastings e.a. (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford e.a.: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 653.

[6] All Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (International Bible Society/ Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1984).

[7] For the moment we need to overlook that "transcendent" and "supernatural" are very difficult to define, for they presuppose an understanding of what is "natural" and of a reality which is transcendent. It seems to me that for a traditional African his relationship to his departed forefathers is perfectly natural and that the general tendency to call this "supernatural" shows that we look at it from a Western point of view. For the sake of the discussion we will stick to a vague understanding of "transcendent" and "supernatural" with Western scientific overtones.

process of Westernisation and globalisation, but how at the same time it has its own flavour and characteristics. In the third section (§3), we will look at some of the main causes of secularisation in Africa, in order to understand its roots and also some positive aspects of the process. In the fourth section (§4), we will try to assess the process of secularisation. This is particularly important because we might think at first sight that Christianity, ATR and Islam need to join hands in fighting secularisation as a common enemy to religions. Yet, a closer look shows that some aspects of the process of secularisation are actually provoked by, and concordant with, the Christian faith and understanding of reality. All of this will lay the basis for the last section (§5), in which we will suggest some ways the church should react to this challenge. How can we faithfully witness in our secularising and fragmented world to Christ who is Lord over all of society and over all of our lives?

Through the whole I will be making one generalising and sweeping statement after another, often overlooking details, complexities, variations, and exceptions for the sake of the big picture. The only excuse I can make for this is that on so crucial a subject it is better to remain in generalities than to remain silent, and that all this should be read as an invitation for debate and further research and reflection. In Roman Catholic circles some important work has been done on the question of secularisation in Africa and we will gratefully use what is available.[8] From an evangelical theological perspective the reflection has yet to start, and if this article can instigate such reflection, it has achieved its main objective.

§2 Phenomena and Forms of Secularisation in Africa

In Europe and North America significant studies have been done to collect precise sociological data on the character and scope of secularisation. For

[8] Next to the study of Shorter and Onyancha mentioned in note 3, we need to mention particularly the proceedings of two conferences, one in English and one in French, assembled by the Roman Catholic Secretariat for witness among unbelievers: *Sécularisation en Afrique? Secularisation in Africa?* (Rome: Secretariatus pro non credentibus, 1973) with reports and reflections from many African countries, and: Eloi Messi Metogo, *Dieu peut-il mourir en Afrique? Essai sur l'indifférence religieuse et l'incroyance en Afrique noire* (Paris: Karthala; Yaoundé: Presses de L'UCAC, 1997).

Africa very little data is available. This sparseness is itself a sign of the lack of interest in this phenomenon, which is one reason that it goes largely undetected. Yet the limited sociological data that is available[9] and some more general observations will be sufficient to help us understand both the manifold character of secularisation in sub-Saharan Africa and the seriousness of the challenge. The tentativeness of this sketch is at the same time an incentive to further research. We can see its manifold character especially when we note that "the diminishing role of religion" can show itself in different forms. It can be first of all a diminishing influence on individual lives, secondly a diminishing influence on society, and thirdly religious practices being made subservient to secular goals and therefore the secularisation of religion itself. We will also consider two phenomena that are closely related to secularisation: the desacralisation of certain domains of life, and the influence of secularism as an ideology, but we will attend to these phenomena in the next section on the multiple causes of secularisation. Let us here consider the first three forms of secularisation in turn.

2.1 Individuals. The diminishing influence of the Christian religion on the life of *individuals* shows itself first of all in the disaffiliation or the very loose ties of certain sections of society with the church. We already noted the very low church-attendance in certain poor neighbourhoods in Nairobi and the loose ties of the urban rich in other major cities. Low church attendance in urban areas can easily be hidden from view, because the cities in Africa grow so fast that churches may be filled to the brim, even if the growth of the church does not keep pace with the booming cities.[10] My impression is that, in comparison with Nairobi, in Bangui (which I know best) only smaller numbers are disaffiliating from the church, but that this process is most significant among crucial layers of society: among the politicians, the intellectuals and the affluent. This shows that there are

[9] The data used by Messi-Metogo concerns mainly French-speaking countries in West and Central Africa, yet are older and date from the end of the sixties and from the seventies. It may be that important changes have occurred through the continual evangelistic and educational activities of the churches and through the renaissance of Islam in West Africa. The information collected by Shorter and Onyancha is much more recent, yet covers only Nairobi. I have furthermore used personal observations from our students from different French-speaking countries in Central and West Africa.

[10] Shorter & Onyancha, p. 33.

considerable variations across the continent and may be across denominations. For example, it might be that where French culture is the dominant Western influence those who like to think of themselves as intellectuals, successful or "educated" are more prone to secularisation than where the British influence is stronger.[11] Our students from some parts of French-speaking Africa also pointed to pastors' children or those who lived closest to traditional mission stations as groups which are prone to secularisation.

Low church-attendance is in itself of course not necessarily a sign of secularisation, for the Christian faith may play a very significant role, even when the church does not. However, in general this seems to be a more theoretical than practical option, for pastoral experience suggests that those who do not attend church also tend to neglect their faith in other areas of life. Many of these people may turn to the church in case of sickness or disaster, but even then secularisation remains a reality, for they still live most of their lives without their religion. In their daily struggle for life, faith is not a major factor and secularisation can still be a reality in terms of a diminishing influence of religion on their lives. In case of sickness, danger or death, they could of course prefer to take recourse to a marabout, traditional healer or diviner and this is another reason why low church attendance and even disaffiliation of the church does not necessarily imply secularisation. Yet, notwithstanding the syncretism so common to religious life in Africa, there are important indicators that when the influence of the Christian faith or of ATR on life diminishes, these areas may well become more or less secular. One indicator is the religious indifference, which, as Messi Metogo showed, can be widely detected in sociological data concerning West and Central Africa. Many people interviewed believe that the religion they belong to is not a major issue: it need not be a major factor in the education of their children, and for many it is of little irrelevance to their social and professional life and to the development of their countries.[12] Another indicator that, not only syncretism but also secularism, is a major

[11] Shorter & Onyancha note that churches in Nairobi are associated with affluence (pp. 43ff).

[12] Messi Metogo, pp. 87-119. New sociological research is, however, needed to see how the renaissance of Islam and the heightening of the tensions between Muslims and Christians since this data was collected have influenced religious indifference.

force in Africa relates to morality. It is often noted that African Christians may live morally in syncretistic ways, combining moral values from a Christian with those from a traditional perspective.[13] Yet, when we look particularly at the great urban centres of Africa, we see that moral values are crumbling, even those shared by Africa's three major religions: Christianity, Islam and ATR. The diminishing respect for the older generation, the proliferation of casual sexual relationships, which have dramatically fed the spread of HIV, and the crumbling of stable family structures show this. These phenomena are not condoned by any of the three main religions and thus indicate the diminishing influence of religion on key areas of personal life, and thus also indicate secularisation.

2.2 Society. The diminishing influence of religion on individuals does not stand by itself, but is closely related to the diminishing influence of religion on *society*. Here we refer to the fact that more and more areas of social life are taken away from direct or indirect religious influence. In the West this has been a gradual process that started in the Middle Ages and was intensified since the beginning of the modern era. This was the original sense in which the concept of "secularisation" was used. In a treaty in Westphalia in the seventeenth century, "secularisation" meant first of all the withdrawal of church lands for the benefit of lay owners.[14] The same process, of course, repeated itself in other areas of society, when the "secular" universities were established and when hospitals, welfare and many other areas of life gradually came under "secular" authority. I use "secular" here between inverted commas, for those who governed and populated universities, hospitals and welfare institutions were mainly Christians, working with Christian values. Yet the Church as an institution no longer had direct influence in these areas and, though the process is not a necessary one, in due time their value-systems gradually became more and more secular.

In sub-Saharan Africa this type of secularisation often did not replace a Christian influence and value-system, but directly replaced the traditional

[13] For example in Tite Tiénou, *The Theological Task for the Church in Africa*, 2nd edition, revised and expanded (Achimota, Ghana: African Christian Press, 1990), p. 22.

[14] Bryan Wilson, "Secularization", in: Alan Richardson & John Bowden (eds.), *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1983), p. 534.

value-system. It also happened at a much higher speed, because it did not happen as a result of factors internal to the African society and culture, but as a result of external influences. It therefore also created greater and much more immediate upheaval. Colonialism, in most cases, introduced secular states and governments to replace traditional authorities, in which religious and political authority were closely related. Africa was opened up to a global financial and economic market, in which neither traditional nor Christian values played a role, as it used to be when all aspects of life were part of a unified world in which religion was all-pervasive. Even if the schools were originally often mission-led, the skills and science they taught would not strike many as specifically Christian, but they nonetheless undermined many traditional values and beliefs. Thus in a few generations Africa became a society in which many crucial sectors like politics, economy, banking, education and so on operate on predominantly secular values, leaving the leftovers to both ATR and Christianity. As in the West, the degree to which individuals are secularised depends in an important way on their position in such a society. Do they tend to consider either the "public" (and secular) or the "private" (and possibly religious) sphere of life as "real life" and as most important?

2.3 Religion. It might be argued that even in the public spheres Africans remain profoundly religious. How many examples are there of politicians who try to guarantee their success by going to their home villages, invoking their ancestors and ensuring for themselves the strongest fetishes they can obtain? How many university students pray to the God of the Bible or carry an amulet when entering their exam, even if it is an exam in natural science? Isn't this true for all areas of life in Africa, from lovemaking to business and from health to travel? Maybe this is why secularisation in Africa is so difficult to assess, both because of the possibility that certain practices are interpreted differently, and because of the difference between the understanding of secularisation from a traditional religious perspective and from a Christian perspective. Let me clarify this.

Prayer can be used and interpreted in different ways. For Christian, it is supposed to be a sign of living all of our lives before God, realising that there is nothing we can do without his grace and guidance. As such, prayer is an essential part of Christian life. Yet both Christian prayer and traditional incantations and fetishes can also be just another tool to obtain

our secular goals, like health or success in politics, business or love. Success in all of these areas is of course not necessarily a secularised goal, because God created them and we may desire to excel in them in God's service. But in many cases these goals are not understood in any particularly religious way and all the religious practices—Christian, traditional or Islamic—are made subservient to these secular goals. The tendency to put religious practices in the service of our human goals is probably a common human vice. Much Western civil religion and the use of Christianity as a tool for self-fulfilment and self-realisation testify to it. African Christianity and African religion in general are prone to it, because of the often-noted anthropocentrism of ATR In ATR all religious practices are used to serve the harmony and flourishing of the human being, or better of the human community, the clan.[15] Many students of African religion have noted that the approach of many African Christians to the Christian faith is the same: they change to Christian religious practices, because these seem to offer better means to achieve the same goals they had before.[16]

In this respect we do not speak of the secularisation of individuals, nor of areas of society, but the secularisation of religion itself. In the West we can also note a secularisation of religion and of the Christian faith, but in another way. The Christian faith is secularised by many of its adherents in that supernatural reference is becoming less and less significant. As such, many theologians and individual Christians have developed a faith without heaven or hell, without a divine Jesus, without miracles or resurrection and sometimes even without God. To many Africans this type of secularisation of religion itself is almost inconceivable, but they may have their own way of secularising the Christian faith. This might be the form of secularisation that is more specific for Africa: the secularisation of religion by making religious practices—traditional, Christian or Islamic—serve secular goals.

At this point we see why it is in part a question of definition if we consider this use of religious practices to serve secular goals as "secularisation". Our understanding of secularisation depends on our understanding of what religion should be. So from a Christian perspective it would count as secularisation, for true religion is not putting our own

[15] John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London e.a.: Heinemann, 1975), pp. 37-39; Messi Metogo, pp. 47-65.

[16] Messi Metogo, p. 81.

interests first, but loving God above everything and our neighbours as ourselves, trusting that in this way our own deepest needs will be met. From an ATR perspective, however, it might not count as clearly as secularisation, for this religion was anthropocentric from the very start. Yet I want to suggest that the way in which religious practices are used to serve secular goals in contemporary society also counts as secularisation from the perspective of ATR Traditional religion is anthropocentric, but it is not just any human goal that would count as worthy to be pursued. The goal itself is religiously determined. The proper goal is a life in harmony with the living and the dead, with the non-human spirits and with the whole creation. In modern-day urbanised religious practices, this context of the clan and the living and the dead becomes less and less important. When people have moved away from their village and have lived for a few generations in one of the main urban centres of Africa, initiation and other religious practices relating one to the clan and ancestors are in many cases the first practices to erode. The stronger and more resistant practices are the more magical ones[17] and these can be used to pursue more individual and secular goals, concerning which the ancestors may not be properly consulted and of which they might not approve at all. This is to say that we need to consider a form of secularisation which might be particularly strong in Africa (and maybe in similar societies) and is different from secularisation as it has occurred in Europe and North America. It is the tendency to use highly supernatural practices to pursue secular goals. We could validly call this a form of secularisation. Next to the secularisation of individual lives and of certain main sectors of society, it is a reality we need to consider in Christian witness, education and ministry. Before we can see how we should appreciate this triple secularisation, we need first of all to look into their principle causes.

§3 Multiple Causes

Understanding the causes of secularisation is an important task if we are to have a balanced appreciation of this process and be able to assess what stand and what action the church should take. At the same time, understanding the causes of such a long-term, broad, and complex process as secularisation is extremely difficult. It is easy to exchange causes and

[17] **Messi Metogo**, p. 61.

effects and to overlook hidden factors. This is particularly true of the African context where in the last one hundred years many different cultural and social influences and changes have intertwined, and where little research has been done concerning this phenomenon. We will limit ourselves to a number of key causes, which suggest themselves because they run parallel to developments within the Western world, or which suggest themselves because of the intrinsic force certain conceptions have in the history of ideas. Altogether we can distinguish: (a) factors related to the Christian faith, (b) factors related to ATR, (c) the role of modern science and education, (d) ideological influences, and (e) social change.

3.1 Christian Faith. Many Christian theologians who reflected on secularisation, such as the missiologist Arend Th. Van Leeuwen, have noted that it is not only, and not even in the first instance, a danger to the Christian faith, but that it is the Jewish-Christian world-view itself which provoked a certain form of secularisation.[18] For the sake of clarity we will call this form of secularisation *desacralisation.* Many areas of life, such as fertility and death, and many offices, such as political authority and the medical profession, which were treated as sacred by the peoples around Israel and the Early Church, were no longer so for Israel and the Church. These areas and offices were considered created by God and therefore under the authority of humanity. Thus for the Israelites the king was not sacred, as for the Babylonians and Egyptians; nor was fertility and sexuality, as with the Canaanites; nor was illness, which was not so much sacralised as completely demonised in surrounding cultures. The desacralisation and de-demonisation of these spheres of life, and of creation in general, did not mean that they had nothing to do with God. As God's creation they were under God, and the human creature was responsible for how he served as a king, how he lived out his sexuality and how he addressed illness. It was in fact because of the desacralisation of these areas that they could effectively come under the commandments of God. A divine king cannot be criticised; an Israelite king, being a creature like all of us, could be and often was criticised by the prophets. All the commandments in the area of sexuality show that it was an area in which God was to be served, and that it was considered an area which could be

[18] Arend Th. Vand Leeuwen, *Christianity and World History: The Meeting of the Faiths of East and West* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964).

mastered, because it was under the authority of the human being as God's steward.

The desacralisation of the world is thus implied in the belief of a radical distinction (which is not necessarily a distance) between God and creation. It is furthermore implied in the understanding of the human being as created in the image of God and called to be the steward and lord of the rest of creation. These beliefs were foundational to the development of modern science, for it is only as creation is considered as being organised by its own natural laws and the human being as capable of uncovering and using these, that scientific discovery becomes a sensible and noble undertaking.[19] This Christian understanding of creation and of the human being as God's image has gradually desacralised the African understanding of reality since the introduction of the Christian faith in sub-Saharan Africa in the modern era. No longer are all illnesses conceived in terms of spiritual influences, but bacteria, parasites and hospitals have a growing place in people's imaginations, even if different and often opposed understandings of illness and healing continue to exist together. When considering how a certain soil can best be used, one no longer (only) consults the ancestors and spirits of the area, but may equally refer to an agronomist, who in his profession expresses the idea that the human being is called to stewardship of the earth. This already shows how secularisation—secularisation as desacralisation—is not only negative and to be feared, but is at least in part a consequence of the Jewish-Christian understanding of the world. As such it is liberating, for it frees the human being from subservience to spiritual powers and puts him under only one authority, the authority of the Creator Himself who created him in his image as the lord of creation.

3.2 ATR. The Cameroonian Roman Catholic theologian Éloi Messi Metogo, who has written one of the most important studies on secularisation and religious indifference in Africa, defends the thesis that secularisation and religious indifference also have roots in ATR This may at first sight seem strange, for the traditional African worldview is mystical or spiritual all through. All reality is a unified whole woven through by all

[19] Christopher B. Kaiser, *Creation and the History of Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/London: Marshall Pickering, 1991); Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), pp. 23-34.

types of spiritual forces and there are no events that have no spiritual causes and that are without spiritual significance. Yet Messi Metogo points to two characteristics which are common to ATR that make the religion prone to secularisation or religious indifference, and which can be triggered when through modern science and education the mystical understanding of reality is played down. The first is the anthropocentrism of ATR, which we noted already. This anthropocentrism leads to a very pragmatic attitude to religion: if this healer or diviner cannot effectively heal or protect, we will look for another. This is illustrated in the way a Christian group promotes itself in Kinshasa: "If your god is dead, try the God of the Church of Christ in Mission!"[20] This attitude resulted in many conversions to Christianity. Yet it can equally easily lead to the abandonment of Christianity or of religion in general, if it does not prove effective or if its effect might not be in the line with what we hope for or if it takes too long to be effective.

A second factor which Messi-Metogo mentions that makes ATR and Christians who are deeply rooted in this tradition sensitive to secularising forces is the often noted characteristic that the Creator-God according to many traditional myths is considered to be distant. He is in fact so far away that his existence is of little import for our day-to-day lives, and such a God can be easily pushed to the margins of life.[21] We saw that that is exactly what secularisation is: it is not necessarily a negation of God, but more his gradual retreat from many wider spheres of our personal and social lives.

3.3 Science and Education. Science and the scientific worldview as spread through modern education have of course been another major factor in the development of secularisation. The modern school-system did not only break down traditional structures of authority; it implicitly or explicitly promoted a worldview in which the world is understood in terms of natural causes and effects, and in which spiritual forces have no role to play. This understanding remained and remains of course often at the outskirts of people's perception of reality. Yet it does have at least some influence, and more so in those areas on which the traditional worldview

[20] Quoted in Jean Masamba Ma Mpolo, *Le Saint-Esprit interroge les esprits: essai de relecture deet pistes psychopastorales de la spiritualité en Afrique: Cas de la République Démocratique du Congo* (Yaoundé: CLE, 2002), p. 23 (our translation).

[21] Messi Metogo, pp. 33-45.

does not seem to have much bearing, like the world of banking and economics, to which we referred already. The secularising influence of education was of course the strongest when education was not only promoting a scientific understanding of reality, but also promoting a secular value system, as in the government schools, be it under the colonial or post-colonial powers. Here the aim was to succeed in the world-order of colonial or postcolonial powers, to become an "évolué", as they were called in the Belgian Congo: to succeed in the evolving secular structures of government, production and trade.

When we consider education, it is one of the ironies of history that the *Christian mission* can be called "the great instrument of secularisation in the midst of the ancient religious societies of Asia and Africa."[22] Through their schools and hospitals the missions brought the modern scientific understanding to the most remote villages in Africa and to the ends of the earth. In part this was the education of the Jewish-Christian understanding of a desacralised world, in which the human being can take up responsibility for his life and start fighting to make this life into a liveable world. He is no longer at the mercy of ancestors or other spirits, but can start using his creativity and authority over creation, which he has received as the image of God. On the other hand missionaries were also children of their own time and culture. They often promoted through their schools and lives in some respects a more Western secular worldview than a Christian one. It has often been noted that this lead to a practical syncretism, for many young African Christians could not enter the Christian faith with their own experience of the spirit-world, which was so real to them. They therefore ended up living in two worlds in continuous tension: a Christian and a traditional one. At the same time it made the most missionised families, who for different reasons took a greater step away from ATR, receive a form of faith which was most of all a preparation for heaven and not easily related to everyday life. This may be one of the reasons for the phenomenon that pastors' children and those living in the vicinity of mission stations seem to be more prone to secularisation than others.

[22] Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998; originally Edinburgh: Edinburgh House Press, 1963), p. 58; cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM, 1966), p. 18.

3.4 Ideology. As a specific secularising factor we need also to refer to ideological influences which made a direct attack on religion and belief in God. These influences were however very unevenly distributed across the continent and were in general not overly influential in large sections of the population. We need however to take account of them in some circles, such as in the influence of atheistic Marxism, which for example used to be rather aggressively promoted in the school system in communist Congo-Brazzaville.[23] A more subtle widespread influence may be the consciously irreligious and often openly atheist understanding of science that was propagated through government higher education in the some fourteen former French colonies south of the Sahara. In Europe the Enlightenment in France was much more hostile to the Christian faith than in Britain and Germany, and African education according to the French system still has a tendency to be quite openly secularist and anti-religious. This is even more prominent because of the central place philosophy—philosophy according to secular French standards—has in the French curriculum in secondary schools. In this respect the common distinction between *secularisation* and *secularism* is helpful. These ideologies are not just secular but secularist, for they do not only propose or provoke a separation between secular and religious areas of life; they further claim that all of life should be lived according to secular values and that all influence of religions and religious ideas is to be resisted and despised.[24]

3.5 Social Change. Among the main forces that fuel the process of secularisation we also need to point to the social changes Africa is going through, mainly those related to urbanisation, the fragmentation of life and society, globalisation and religious pluralism. *Urbanisation*, the movement of more and more people to great urban centres, is a world-wide process, and on an international scale Africa remains the least urbanised continent. Yet over the past fifty years urbanisation has been a major social factor, and cities such as Nairobi, Kinshasa, Johannesburg, Lagos and Abidjan have been growing at an incredible rate and will in all probability continue to do so for the coming decades.[25] When people move from a village setting to an urban centre, they are first of all uprooted. The old securities and values no longer seem to apply and life needs new structures. This in itself could

[23] Messi Metogo, pp. 150-158.
[24] Wilson, pp. 533f.
[25] Shorter & Onyancha, p. 32.

equally lead to a more profound Christian commitment rather than to a withdrawal. It can open people to conversion or to a deeper commitment, when people are well received by Christians in the city who offer them a form of faith that helps them to survive and structure their new life, which they experience as simultaneously promising and upsetting. In this respect urbanisation offers great opportunities for Christian witness.

More often however, rather than being a trigger for conversion or for a deeper conviction, moving to the city and the life in the city itself is a cause for backsliding and secularisation. This is due to some social characteristics of life in the city, most of all its *fragmentation* and the multiplicity of relationships, many of which have an impersonal character.[26] In a village setting life is generally lived as a unity, shared with a single group holding the same values. Furthermore, all aspects of village life relate to the closely integrated structures of family, higher authorities and religion. This is true in a traditional African village, but equally in a Christianised African village. There are only one or two churches, which also operate the school and the clinic. The elders of the village church discuss all aspects of the life of their parishioners, more or less as much as they used to do when they gathered as elders under the traditional chief. In the city, however, the people lived with in the family are not the same as those met on the street, in the church and when trying to earn a living in the market or elsewhere. All these social groups furthermore have their own value system, and their life in church will mostly have nothing to do with what they do in the marketplace, and may not be shared by the rest of their extended family or even their family unit. It is particularly in the modern cities that large spheres of life have no link with personal religious values. There is therefore in urban societies an enormous pressure to relegate religious convictions to specific areas of life, most often to the private sphere. This shrinking scope of where personal religion counts can in the first place lead to a tension between conflicting value systems in which one participates. It can secondly easily make religion of such minor importance that it becomes redundant. This may be one of the main causes of religious indifference. It is not so much that people consciously withdraw from their Christian or other religious allegiance. It is more that their religion seems to be of no

[26] See on this characteristic of urban life Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (London, SCM. 1965), pp. 41ff.

significance for most spheres of life, and that they therefore do not any longer give it serious consideration. As Harvey Cox notes: "The gods of traditional religions live on as private fetishes or the patrons of congenial groups. But they play no role whatever in the public life of the secular city."[27]

This fragmentation of life in the city (or in rural settings influenced by urban mindsets) is greatly reinforced by two other social factors: globalisation and religious pluralism. *Globalisation* is the ongoing process whereby life in more and more of even the remotest corners of the world is heavily influenced by global developments. The economic interests and values of the Western world dominate more and more of life throughout the world. It is those secularised values that are spread by the publicity of Coca-Cola and other multinational corporations dominating the world-market. Some countries, like North Korea, try to resist, and the Arab world still tries to offer a major alternative. Yet since the beginning of the 1990s the African countries south of the Sahara by and large tie in with this development and consciously seek to become part of this globalised world with its secular values. Particularly in the cities the media promotes these values and the "freedom" to tie into the world of capitalism and consumer culture.[28]

This global economy is spreading over a religiously *pluralist* world and therefore presupposes that it cannot follow any particular religious value systems. It forgets that thereby consumerism and capitalism become the principle values. From a Christian perspective we cannot just see this secularisation as the limitation of religious influence. It becomes in fact a form of idolatry, in which the false god of capitalism contests with the one true God of Israel.[29]

These social forces promoting secularisation—urbanisation, fragmentation and globalisation—can be the most discomforting of all, because they have the appearance of necessary processes over which we have no influence at all. We may believe in the possibility of witnessing against the

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[27] Cox, p. 2.

[28] On the media see Shorter & Onyancha, pp. 71-85.

[29] Cf. Vinoth Ramachandra, *God's that Fail: Modern Idolatry & Christian Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), pp. 106-126.

ideologies and an anthropocentric understanding of reality, and in the possibility of helping Christians towards a better understanding of science and of how to live with God in a desacralised world. Yet the idea of fighting urbanisation and globalisation seems to be ridiculous, and the tendency of some missions to prefer working in rural contexts compared to urban contexts has if anything left these fast growing centres of public life devoid of sufficient Christian witness and presence. Yet before we ask how we should respond to this pervading process of secularisation, we need to take a closer look at the question of how, in fact, we as Christians should evaluate this seemingly irreversible process of secularisation.

§4 A Christian Assessment of Secularisation

In both the understanding and the assessment of the process of secularisation the collaboration between Christians from different continents takes on a new urgency and carries new promises. Christians from North America and Europe have been struggling for generations with the pervasiveness of secularisation and the destructive influence it has had on these formerly predominantly Christian societies. Christians from Africa can help European and North-American Christians see where they have accommodated too easily to their secularised worlds. At the same time Christians from the western secularised countries can help African Christians to reflect on and react to the fast-growing reality of secularisation, with which the western Christian communities have been dealing for so long and from which they have learnt by trial and error.

The debate over secularisation in the West was particularly vibrant during the 1960s and 1970s. At that time church leaders and theologians were confronted with its enormous impact as they lost their influence on huge sectors of society. Many Christians were so impressed with the forces of secularisation that they disengaged themselves radically or gradually from the church. In these countries the debate has now calmed down, both because secularisation is more of a given than a surprise and because in some measure in the private sphere religion is again becoming acceptable, be it in a vague, highly pluralist and privatised format. Yet in view of the impact of secularisation on other parts of the world, it is worthwhile to return to this discussion once again.

As with many theological debates, the theological appreciation of secularisation moves between two extremes. On the one hand there are those who feel that secularisation is basically a good thing, that it is a natural consequence of humanity's coming of age. The enlightened person is no longer scared of nor in need of religious forces in every step he takes, but takes his own responsibility for organising his life and world. Christianity should be lived "without religion". In the most extreme case this even means that we should do away with the idea of God, as in the so-called "Death-of God" theology. At the other extreme there are those who wish that all secularisation could be undone. They hope for a return to what is often called "Christendom", a unified society in which all aspects of life are organised religiously and in which there is a close link between the church and every area of society. Roman Catholic restorationism and Reformed "Reconstructionism" can count as examples.

As with many theological debates the truth is somewhere between these two extremes. It is not that we should look for compromise, but rather that the question demands a more detailed evaluation, asking which aspects of secularisation are good or bad, and in which respect secularisation is to be welcomed and in which respect it is rather to be resisted. We need to appreciate the *desacralisation* of reality as a liberating result of the discovery that the world in which we live is God's creation.[30] As creatures like us, political authorities do not have absolute power over us, but they are accountable to God for their use of their authority, which He has entrusted to them.[31] As human beings we are not simply at the mercy of good and evil spiritual forces, which play their games with us. These forces are part of the created order, as are we, and are under the power of Christ (cf. Colossians 1:15-20), and we as beings in the image of God are called to

[30] It is worth pondering the interesting idea of Newbigin: "The preaching of Jesus as the sole Redeemer, liberating men from the hitherto unbreakable grip of the old sacral order in family and tribe, has been itself the great revolutionary force. At this point the experience of Asian and African Christians, for whom secularization means first off a kind of liberation, can be a help to the Christians of Europe for whom secularization appears as a wholly menacing reality." (*Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, pp. 58f.)

[31] Cf. Kwame Bediako, "Christian Religion and African Social Norms: Authority, Desacralisation and Democracy", in: idem, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 234-251; cf. Romans 13:1-7.

have dominion over the world in which He has placed us. The world therefore is our home and not our enemy.

But if desacralisation is a good thing, this does not mean that these areas of life are to be lived godlessly or without any reference to God. As the whole world is God's creation, it is the Creator who knows how they are used to his glory, for our wellbeing and according to his intention. If the risen Christ is Lord over all creation, we need to serve Him in all the areas of our lives, be it the "public" world of politics, economics and science, or the "private" world of our family life and personal interests. *Secularism*, which says that our whole life should be lived without any reference to God, should therefore be criticised, firstly because it is dishonouring God and disobedient to Him, and secondly because it brings us under the service of other masters. There is only one God whose service truly liberates, and if we live our life in the service of another masters, be it consumerism or some other secular ideology, we will always end up being enslaved.[32]

For the same reason we cannot accept the secular idea that certain areas of life are religiously *neutral*, and that we should live them in our religiously pluralist world according to neutral or secular principles. There is no place for neutrality, neither in our personal lives nor in the public spheres of finance and politics: Jesus claims every square inch of this world as his, not as a usurper but because it is only in Him that there is freedom and life.

This does not mean that Christians are bound to fight every form of separation between the church and other structures of society. In this respect the Christian faith is different from ATR and Islam, where political and religious authority are one and where both reside in the chief, or in Mohammed and his followers. Even if in Moses political and religious authority went together, they were separated from the time of the Israelite kings onward, and the search for a proper separation of "religious" and "secular" authority has been a characteristic of mainstream Christianity. This, however, does not mean that the so-called secular authorities have nothing to do with God. The Israelite prophets constantly called the kings to use their authority under God according to his will and for the wellbeing of his people. Both political and religious authorities are considered to be

[32] Cf. Ramachandra, p. 112.

under God, yet they both have their proper sphere of action. Through separating these powers it is easier for the religious authorities to avoid being compromised by too direct an involvement in political government, but exactly because of that they can continue to call the government to obedience to God. For the prophets, who are part of the court, this is of course much more difficult (cf. 1 Kings 22:5-28).[33]

This shows how delicate it is to find a balanced Christian view of secularisation. The Christian faith can appreciate the need for a diversification of different domains in which institutions work and not only between church and state, but we could extrapolate this with respect to the economic sphere, the sphere of education, the sphere of law, etc. A so-called "cecaero-papism", in which all authority is joined in one person or institution is bound to be unhealthy, because of the corruptive character of power and even more so of absolutist and totalitarian power.[34] Yet the spheres of life that in this sense could be called "secular" are not "secular" in the sense that they can be lived separate from God. These are all parts of the life created by God, and we are therefore called to proclaim and serve Christ as Lord over our families, schools, tribunals, governments and money, as much as over our churches.

One final remark in connection with the appreciation of the secularisation process shows how important it is that Christians in different continents learn from each other's weaknesses. It is too easy to say, as it is sometimes suggested, that we should not be too concerned about people drifting away from the church, because for many of them their religious affiliation remains a latent reality. In times of crisis they will therefore often come back to the church for help. This may be true, but first of all we should note that this type of religious bond is far removed from the biblical concept of faith. If we are called to have faith in Jesus, we are called to be his disciples, to be his followers from day to day in all aspects of our life.

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[33] Cf. Benno van den Toren, "The Christian God and Human Authority: A Theological Inquiry with Reference to Africa's Principal World-Views", *Exchange* 30 (2001), pp. 235-255.

[34] The necessity of a diversification in different spheres, particularly as societies grow bigger, more complex, and therefore less personal, has received much attention in the neo-Calvinist philosophy. See for example James W. Skillen, "From the Covenant of Grace to Equitable Public Pluralism: The Dutch Calvinist Contribution", *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (1996), pp. 67-96.

This is what we referred to above when talking about Christ as Lord over all aspects of our life and society. But the development of the church in Europe and North America has also shown another weakness to this argument that we do not need to be concerned about these secularised people. The fact is that even if these people themselves have a latent "faith", which in times of crisis is activated, they will not be able to pass this faith on to the next generation. Exactly because it is hidden, their children will only see and come to share their lived values, which are more apparent, and not the ones that are not lived out. It will equally not do to say that we should respect the right and liberty of our children to choose their religious affiliation when they are grown up and can choose for themselves. The secularising powers in our world are so strong, that if the parents do not choose to bring up their children with a strong alternative way of life, society will make this choice for them. Society will ingrain their children so profoundly that it will become very hard for them later to choose another life than their culture proposes for them. Not to choose for your children is also a choice. This consideration, that latent religious affiliation may be an important reality in one generation, but be lost in the next, is particularly relevant for Africa, where the different generations follow each other so rapidly.

§5 Contextual Theology for Secularising Africa

We are now at the point where we can enter into the question of how to begin responding to the enormous challenge of secularisation in Africa. We will not enter into the practicalities of "how to" approaches: how to evangelise secularised Africans and how to disciple them to become followers of Christ, who are salt in a secularised society and who in their turn can attract others. These questions need to be addressed in due time. Yet I think that we often enter too soon into this type of practicality. We have seen that secularisation in Africa is related to the way Christians understand the world and how ATR understands religion and God. We have seen how secularisation is related to a modern understanding of science and society and to the processes of urbanisation and the fragmentation of life. If we do not address the profound alterations in the understanding of the Christian faith that secularisation wants to force on us, we run the risk of incorrectly adapting our message to the secularised understanding of what religion may be. We might give away the glory and strength of our Gospel

before we actually start addressing the world. Our globalised and secular world is in general not totally opposed to religion; it just wants religion to remain in its proper place of personal and church life, of inner motivation and of comforting in time of need. What it must not do is get involved in the world of government and economics, for that is where the "neutral" secular values should reign uncontested. A theological reflection is necessary on the question of what the Gospel message actually boils down to in a secularised world and what message this world actually needs. When we take our mission seriously, we need to reflect on our message. Missiology and practical theology need sound doctrine and systematic theological reflection. I want to propose that secularisation can only be addressed if we put a number of theological truths at the centre of our proclamation and life:

5.1 Contextual theology should address the context in which we live. This is of course not so much a doctrine, but rather a *meta*-doctrine, a statement *about* doctrine. This is not necessarily what the church should teach all the time explicitly, but more a rule that should guide the church in how it goes about its ministry of teaching.[35] This remark about contextual theology may sound all too obvious, yet it isn't. All too often contextual theology tries to relate Christian doctrine to the experiences and convictions of Africa's past, not of Africa's present. It will for example study traditional conceptions of God, of sacrifice and prayer in certain tribes, and then contextualise the Gospel with regards to these conceptions. The problem, however, is that these traditional ideas no longer exist in any pure form except in remote areas and particularly not in the fast growing urban centres. These traditional ideas are indeed very much a part of Africa's present, but not in an unmitigated form. They have entered into the mix of cultural influences, which make up Africa's present: ATR, Christianity, Islam and western secularised thought. The reason that theology in Africa and everywhere should be contextual is that the liberating Gospel should address people were they are. Contextual theology should therefore not tie Africans nor any others to their traditions and past, but should address them in their present. Of this present their past is obviously a major part, but many other factors play a role, including those related to secularisation, urbanisation, fragmentation etc.

[35] I take it that the most basic task of the formulation of "doctrine" (from "*doctrina*", which means teaching) is to guide the church in its teaching ministry.

5.2. Our faith and Christian life should be radically theocentric. God should be at the centre of our life and worship. He should be the one we love above all else. Biblically speaking this is not in any way an anti-human message. It is necessary to put the stress on God, because according to Scriptures it is only when we direct our lives radically to God and Christ that we will flourish. It is only when we radically depend on Him and seek Him above anything else that our lives will be fulfilled and attain their goal (f. ex. Matthew 16:25). African Christianity is vulnerable to secularisation when it does not liberate itself from the anthropocentrism that often spilled over from its background in ATR. The Christian faith is often evaluated from the point of view of the way God responds to our needs. In many prayer group meetings I have attended, attention is focused primarily on petitionary prayer for specific needs of group members or of people they are related to. It is easy for people in this environment to go from one healer to another. They may try a Christian healer if the traditional one is not able to help, but may finally return to the traditional healer when even the newest charismatic Christian healer in town does not deliver what they expect from him or her. Such an attitude could easily turn into materialism when science proves more promising or into religious indifference when Christianity or any other religion does not give what is sought for. John V. Taylor perceptively noted as early as in the 1960s: "If God remains 'outside' much longer, Africa's this-worldliness will turn to materialism."[36] It is precisely at this point that we find one of the flaws of the charismatic movement in Africa. It often borders on preaching a health and wealth Gospel with a theology that sees financial and physical prosperity as a direct consequence of a life lived according to God's will. Their strength is that they relate much better to the felt needs than many of the traditional churches do. Their spiritual weakness is that their teaching is often not sufficiently clear about seeking God not primarily for what He gives to us, but because we love Him for who He is. Faith should be concentrated on the Giver more than on the gifts, and our spiritual lives should be theocentric rather than anthropocentric. We should learn that it is worth serving God even if it means following the One, who took up his cross and who asks us to do the same, to make God known to his world.

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[36] John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM, 1963), p.82.

5.3 We should accept the desacralisation of the world and our responsibility that comes with it. Our response to the desacralisation of the world should not be an attempt to re-sacralise or re-demonise it. The tendency in certain brands of African Christianity (often imported from elsewhere) is to see demons everywhere and to address all problems by chasing away the specific demons causing it, be it a spirit of poverty, of illness, etc. In this sense we see in many areas a movement contrary to secularisation and an inflation of demons and spirits. This is spiritually unhealthy, both because it centres spiritual life not on God but on our problems, and because it makes human beings helpless victims of spiritual powers. It does not challenge people to use the gifts granted to them as people made in the image of God in order to address their problems. It also easily estranges from the church those people who have been more successful in life and who have discovered that you can address many problems in other ways: by diligent work and foreseeing the risks that life entails. Sometimes the most important spirit to be chased are spirits of irresponsible action and of laziness, and those spirits are not always demonic, but human—all too human. Furthermore, this approach can easily disappoint people who have been attracted into the church by promises of healing and quick solutions. If they turn their back on the church for being disappointed by cheap promises, they may turn back to ATR or be easy prey for secularisation. In both cases they will be more difficult to evangelise and disciple than they were before this bad experience. But some tough theological and pastoral reflection is required in this area, for demon-possession and spiritual warfare are a reality. If we do not recognise them, secularism has blinded us to an important part of reality. The reality of spiritual powers has too long gone unrecognised by Western and Westernised theologians. By falling to the opposite extreme of denying these powers, such theology certainly does not help the African churches, for which spiritual powers are so real. We need spiritual discernment both to see where demons go unrecognised, and at the same time to see were realities are demonised too quickly. We need to work and pray also for insight to know when we need to pray for strength to work diligently and patiently, rather than expecting too much from isolated prayers for deliverance.[37]

[37] See for a critical analysis of the charismatic movements in Africa along these lines Masamba ma Mpolo, *Le Saint-Esprit interroge les esprits*.

5.4. Christ should be proclaimed and served as Lord over our entire lives. One possible reaction to secularisation can be to privatise religion or to isolate Christian communities from the rest of the hostile world. *Privatisation* is the tendency to limit our religion to our private world and simply to accept that the world at large runs according to secular values. Such privatisation has become a particularity of the Christian faith in North America and it has been quite successful, considering the power of Christian organisations and the vibrant life of many churches on this continent. They seem to have resisted secularisation much better than in Western Europe. They teach us that a strong personal faith is necessary to survive as a Christian in a secular culture. Yet, while we may need to accept this privatisation as a practical necessity for a certain time, it cannot be the ideal. We confess Christ as Lord over all of our lives and over all the world. We need to accept the desacralisation of the world, yet without cutting it loose from its Creator and Redeemer. Therefore, *isolation* will equally not do. Isolating Christian groups from the rest of the world - be it according to the model of certain rural Mennonite communities the model of orthodox Chassidic Jews in New York - may help religious groups to survive. Yet, such communities leave the world without a living proclamation of its real Lord. The alternative to isolation and privatisation is the search for a *penetration* of the world in all its domains with the proclamation of the claims of the liberating Lordship of Christ.[38] This needs to be heard in Africa too, where there are serious misunderstandings on this issue. Regularly you hear references to the idea that we need to "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's". This is generally understood to mean that there are two different domains of life and that Christians and the Church should leave the government (and the police and the legislation and so on) to do their own job according to their own principles. We already saw that Christians can agree that the government has its own sphere of responsibility, but this does not mean that governments can do what as they please and have no accountability to God. The "render Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's" is actually a provocative remark of Jesus after He has been shown the image of Caesar on Roman coins. (Matthew 22:21) It is because the image of Caesar is on

[38] See on this choice against privatisation and isolation and for penetration: Os Guinness, "Mission and Modernity: Seven Checkpoints on Mission in the Modern World", in: Philip Sampson, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (eds.), *Faith and Modernity* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1994), pp. 322-352.

the coin, that the emperor can claim it for him. Yet, we need to give God what is God's. Where do we find the the image of God? It is the human being on whom God has put his imprint (Genesis 1:26f). There is therefore no part of our lives on which God has no claim, and if the government has a role to play it is only as a servant of God (Romans 13:4). The implication is also that we need to obey God before any human authority, when the two are in conflict (Acts 4:19).

There are not only theological reasons not to leave the world to its own devices, but to place it all under the Lordship of Christ. As we saw in §3, when our faith is seen to have no importance in public life, it can easily become irrelevant to those who are successful in the public domain or who are called to serve there and for whom that is "the real world". We should show that Christ is also Lord of this real world out there, and that his Lordship is highly relevant and liberating to a world subservient to the idols of consumerism, international trade and the striving for power.

5.5. Christ should be proclaimed both as the Redeemer and as the Goal of our entire beings and of the whole of creation. Lastly we need to understand that Christ is not only the Redeemer of a lost humanity, but also the goal of creation. "All things were created by him and for him." (Colossians 1:16). This is particularly relevant when we consider the fact that secularisation is most of all a problem for "humanity come of age", for people who feel that they are not in need of a divine Redeemer, but who feel that they can handle their own affairs. This is not to say that we do not need a Redeemer. We all do. Yet, most of us do not realise the profoundness of this need and the radical nature of our lostness. Therefore, both in Scriptural times and today, those who experience from day to day that they cannot save themselves are the ones most open to receive the message of salvation. In that sense the church is a place heralding a great "welcome for losers". Yet, it is a tragedy that the Gospel is often proclaimed in a way, that makes it appear as if God has nothing to offer to those whose life is going on well. This may be one of the reasons that in a city like Bangui it is particularly the affluent and the successful, who disengage from the church. And when we want to reach them with the Gospel we often take pains to tell them that their life is much worse than they believe, and that their situation is actually most miserable. Even if people realise this themselves deep down, it is not a message they like to hear. Yet, they may be open to hear the rich positive biblical truth that they

are created for Christ and that everything they are and do finds its goal and fulfilment in Him. He is the Goal, which makes our life worth living and surpassing everything we could previously imagine that life had to offer. So Christ is not only the answer to our needs but also the One to offer our successes. The church is indeed a place for losers (Matthew 5:31f; 1 Corinthians 1:26-28), but also the place where we can bring all the gifts our Creator has given us, so that He can crown them with his grace. It is maybe only when we see the great purpose for which God has created us, that the more successful among us start to realise our wretchedness and lostness. We are indeed far from this goal of living in a loving relationship with God, in harmony with our neighbours and of taking care, developing and enjoying creation. From this perspective of the purpose of our life, the whole of our lives, even those parts which we might have considered the most secular, are shown to be profoundly religious, because they are intended to flourish in a loving relationship with our Creator. It is thus that they fall under God's judgement for being so far off their God intended goal and under the grace of Him who send Christ to be the Reconciler, Goal and Head of all creation (Colossians 1:20).