Africa

Spectrum

Religion and Politics in Africa: The Future of "The Secular"

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Abstract: This essay discusses the continued importance that religion holds in African life, not only in terms of numbers of believers, but also regarding the varieties of religious experience and its links with politics and the "public sphere(s)". Coinciding with the wave of democratization and economic liberalization efforts since about 1990, a notable growth of the public presence of religion and its political referents in Africa has been witnessed; alongside "development", religion will remain a hot issue in the future political trajectory of the continent. Its renewed presence in public spheres has also led to new understandings of what religion means and how it figures into both "world-making" and identity politics. This will prolong the challenges associated with the role and status of religion in the "secular state model" found in most African countries. Can these states, while "besieged" by believers, maintain neutrality among diverse worldviews, and if so, how? The paper discusses these issues in a general manner with reference to African examples, some taken from fieldwork by the author, and makes a philosophical argument for the development of a new kind of "secular state" that can respect the religious commitments of African populations.

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This essay is inspired by the observation that while we see continued strong religious adherence among people in Africa, most are living in "secular states". How do these two phenomena coalesce, and will the secular model last? Next to issues of "development", this question will animate much of the future political debate in Africa.[1]

Few people would contest the continued importance that religion holds in African life, in terms of not only numbers of adherents, but also the vast scope of religious experiences and the links between religion and politics and public life. Recent decades – coinciding with the wave of democratization and economic liberalization efforts starting in about 1990 – have also shown unrelenting growth in the public presence of religion in Africa. This phenomenon has produced numerous new studies and subfields of research, as well as broader understandings of what religion means and how it functions in "world-making" and in political life.

Obviously, this surge is characteristic not only of Africa and African Studies – it is a global phenomenon. But one could claim that discussions on religion, politics and the "public sphere", and by implication the "secular state model",[2] now make Africa, which is marked by vibrant religious life, a prime case for the comparative study of the relationship between politics and religion.

The term "public sphere" is somewhat worn-out, and partly mythical. It is not some idealized domain of free and rational discussion, but any arena where people and constituencies interact, present points of view, make claims, impose on others or try to get the upper hand. It is often identified with the mass media and state ceremonies, but it is of course wider than that. There are many "public spheres" where clashes of opinion, debates and claim-making occur, and, empirically speaking, research could start in any of these spheres. Obviously, as the so-called "Arab Spring" revolts have shown us, the new social media and Internet-based services are one domain – or, rather, many fragmented domains – that

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1   I am grateful to the organizers and the audience of the Conference in Pilsen for their critical remarks and questions.

2   For example, see Norris and Inglehart 2004; Hackett 2005; An-Na'im 2008; Habermas 2008, 2011; Butler et al. 2011; Igwe 2014.

emerged in the shadow of the classical print and audio-visual media, which are often suppressed. But, for example, art performances, concerts and religious/cultural festivals in which different religious actors participate are also "public spheres". In this general paper, I will discuss that theme with reference to several African examples, notably from the Horn of Africa, partly based on my own field research over the past few years.

To give a definition of religion is difficult, but we need one. Kenneth Burke, the noted literary theorist and rhetorician, talked about religion as "equipment for living". And Clifford Geertz's famous anthropological definition of religion as a "system of symbols" is perhaps too well known to be quoted here, but its emphasis on psychological, socio-cognitive aspects makes it salient.[3] We can still subscribe to such notions. But I define religion here, beyond the more specific, Western, "theological" definition, as follows: a belief in the existence and workings of spiritual beings or divine forces, and the recognition of an invisible order or reality that affects humans and their behaviour. This order always has a transcendental, supra-individual dimension and refers to perceived ancestor spirits, creator beings or forces "beyond". Religion in this sense is, in principle, value-neutral and often seen as a fact of being in the world. One can also consider a secondary aspect of religion: a way to affirm or manipulate identity that is based on people's commitment to this invisible order in some form. Religion is also a deeply felt commitment and a collective "instrument" of community formation, thus often leading to a "politics of identity". Religion is not necessarily a discourse of morality (Stark 2004: 470-71), and indeed, as Ellis and ter Haar (1998: 197-8) have suggested, political leaders' use of religion, including in Africa, is often highly dubious and opportunistic – a way to keep power and influence others. We can recognize and take into account certain African religious vocabularies as codifying mindsets to apprehend the world – some observers here even speak of "epistemologies" (Ellis and ter Haar 2007). But as this conscious reinvention and use of these presumed "epistemologies" by modern-day politicians to stay in power makes clear, they cannot be taken at face value and are not immune to criticism. So, from an analytical vantage point, not from one of believers, to critically assess the moral power and the wider claims of a religious configuration – against a

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3   He said: "Religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." Clifford Geertz (1973), Religion as a Cultural System, in: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 90.

relativist acceptance of all "religious" expression – remains necessary and is indeed possible. In practice, the nature and impact of religion in public life is continuously being evaluated and discussed – by believers, non-believers, citizens and analysts.

Figures: The Pew Surveys as an Entry into Religious Life in Africa

Psychologist Nigel Barber predicted in 2012 that globally "non-believers" would surpass religious believers by 2038 (Barber 2012), as standards of living would improve in many countries (see also Norris and Inglehart 2004). He defined this as 50 per cent or more of the population "disbelieving in God" or being what he called "atheist". We may not live to see the outcome of this prediction, but we have reason to doubt it, certainly in the case of Africa. A quick look at recent figures from the well-known Pew Research Center surveys shows that religion is not declining in Africa, and that more affluence does not necessarily correlate with loss of faith. In 2010, 69 to 98 per cent of inhabitants (depending on the country) were believers in God, the literal truth of the scriptures and Biblical or Qur'anic rules, went to mosque or church regularly, and followed most other religious injunctions. Nine out of ten said that religion was "very important" in their lives (Pew Forum 2010: 3). Practices like sacrifices to spirits and ancestors were seen as important by approximately 27 per cent of all people, reflecting the continued relevance of such so-called "traditional" religious practices. Striking also were the figures on support for Biblical or shari'a/Qur'anic law: The median figure of Christians across African countries who supported making the Bible "the official law of the land" was 60 per cent; among Muslims referring to the Qur'an, the corresponding figure was 63 per cent: clear majorities (Pew Forum 2010: 11).[4] In most countries, more than half of Christians also believe in the "prosperity gospel", meaning that God will grant them wealth and good health if they have or show enough faith (Pew Forum 2010: 2). From 66 to 93 per cent of people wanted their political leaders to have strong religious beliefs; most even agreed to their being of a faith different from their own (Pew Forum 2010: 52). Remarkable exceptions here were Tanzania, where only 35 per cent support religious leaders' involvement in politics, and Ethiopia, where 63 per cent of the people actually oppose religious leaders involving themselves

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4   But this position was especially strong when Muslims were a *minority* in their country.

in politics (although they do not necessarily reject politicians who have religious beliefs or participate openly in religious events as private citizens). These are all telling figures – despite the methodological critiques that could be directed towards the Pew surveys. One could hypothesize that religion has even become the primary identity for most Africans, perhaps above national identity, which is seen as more unstable. Barber's prediction has a long way to go before becoming a reality.

The aspect of identity assertion via religion is all the more relevant now that virtually all religious communities in Africa live in conditions of pluralism – meaning, they know of other religious traditions, but also experience pluralism within their own religion. Due to this inevitable need to relate to others within the context of the state, the political aspect gains relevance. I maintain, therefore, that this pluralism, which is strongly connected to the phenomenon of "modernity" in its multiple forms, remains a challenge that must always be addressed, and raises questions for both politics and any religious tradition. Nowhere is this challenge more apparent than in Africa, where the diversity and variety of denominations and streams of religious practice are quite remarkable. Some of the elements especially striking in African religious life are its strong performative, publicly enacted presence and its materially explicit series of practices – ceremonies, participatory rituals and prayer gatherings, and acoustically enhanced religious services – all claiming space, and not necessarily all peaceful or harmonious.

Dominant Themes in Research on Religion in Africa

Research on religions and religious cultures has been advancing rapidly in African Studies. In fact, the depth and the richness of recent work are remarkable. But comparative study is often lacking. In what follows, I first briefly mention three notable, current research emphases and then move on to the main topic: the status of "the secular".

New Ethnography and Historiography of Religion: Examples from the Horn of Africa

Ethnographic studies of the past 10 to 15 years have underlined the wealth of Christian, Muslim and "traditional" or "ethno-religious" cultures in Africa. They reveal a fascinating complexity and depth of existing religious traditions, which signify much more than politics or security issues. Apart from ongoing work on textual traditions and new ap-

proaches to ritual, many studies have produced new views on the varieties of everyday religious practice, the materialities of religion, and personal religious experiences and changes due to conversion. This is evident in, among other studies, recent publications on Evangelical-Pentecostal beliefs in Ethiopia, which have greatly increased since the early 1990s (see, for example, Haustein 2011a, 2011b; Freeman 2012; Haustein and Fantini 2013; Tibebe Eshete 2013). Some view the growth of this faith in an already majority-Christian country as unexpected, but that would be a superficial judgment on the dynamics of religion in a modernizing society. Islam and Christianity have undergone significant global reconnections to religious institutions, associations and networks outside the national state context as well as internal transformations, in this process evincing both reinvention and denominational change. The result is that in Ethiopia the "ethno-religions" are declining rapidly, despite some hybrid forms here and there retaining adherents.

The nature of religious experiences in the Horn of Africa has been shown to be quite varied, made clear by research on healing practices, mediums, pilgrimages, reformist-revivalist movements, customary forms of spirituality, neotraditional rituals, and saints and shrines as focal points of local religious practice. I recall my visit a couple of years back to a Muslim monastery-like settlement (around a shrine, or *zawiyya*) of the Qadiriyya Sufi order in northern Ethiopia. It catered to the local Muslim community and provided a place of refuge and reflection, if not rehabilitation, for young, urban Muslims struggling with their personal identity and future (see Abbink 2008). Its leaders played a mediatory role and also reverberated with a relaxed attitude – which was for them self-evident – towards other believers, Muslim or Christian, as they searched for divine inspiration and harmony. This attitude could be said to aid in the formation of a pan-local culture of religious coexistence that might even be used as a model for wider networks of coexistence. A similar story could be told of Orthodox Christian church or monastic retreats and other places of pilgrimage and worship. Christianity in its various guises – from Orthodox to Protestant-Evangelical and Pentecostal – shows a commitment to social and personal improvement and moral codes that are vital on the local and parish levels and that define the life-worlds of its adherents. In these locations, the sphere of (party) politics and administration is deemed irrelevant and to be avoided, but religious institutions can work out accommodative relations with it, notably on the local level.

Another example of religious "coexistence" from fieldwork (in Wollo, northern Ethiopia) is that of the mediating, not purely religious, role of local Muslim leaders and Orthodox-Christian as well as more

traditional spirit mediums or local experts called *abagars* to help people solve disputes concerning family, insults, land, debt and other issues. These *abagars* ("fathers of the land") worked to find common ground between two parties, based on shared underlying principles of piety and justice, in a way that a state court could *not* do. They thereby constructed a reflexive moral authority acceptable to all. Characteristic here was the irrelevance of the *specific* religious allegiance of those involved: While the *abagars* were usually of Muslim background, both Christian and Muslim litigants accepted their verdict, which was not based on *shari'a* law.

So here, as in many other African societies, religious leaders are not only community leaders and preachers, but also moral authorities playing mediating roles in solving local conflicts even between people of different faiths or denominations. One could make the case that these religious intermediaries are successful precisely because they do not assume any political role. On this basis they gain authority and claim adherence – while at the same time respecting and affirming the identity of their "clients" in their own respective religions. Similar examples can be cited from across Africa of such successful religious intermediaries, although not all of them stay out of politics.

Many anthropological field studies of religious culture show us the intermingling or "hybridity" of traditions, as seen during pilgrimages to a holy site or shrine. For one example, in his fascinating description of religious life in Gamo, southern Ethiopia, Tadesse Wolde (2007) describes how four different religious denominations come together during a festival focused on one particular sacred place that is historically devoted to an old Orthodox Church object, the Gabriel *tabot* (the symbolic replica of the covenantal Ark). Here, different religious meanings attached to the place by these four groups were enacted almost simultaneously in this semiannual festival in a spirit of mutual forbearance and tolerance. Such an accommodative attitude cannot be assumed among all believer groups. But this kind of practice of shared meaning creation in public (religious) space provides a kind of archetypical model of overlapping or syncretic celebration. It could be elaborated upon as a model of religious relations in a wider domain, as a temporary suspension of difference based on the recognition of the overarching shared values of piety and spirituality.

A second major theme of research is that of the "mediatization" of religion and religious identities. Religious elites and younger generations using new information and communication technologies and social media has been one of the big developments of the past two decades. The ways in which mediatization has changed, simplified and sharpened the

religious message, and transformed the practising of religion as well as enhanced religious rivalry, is a growing field of interest. Major things are happening here: The study of how religious groups use the media has led to a broader understanding both of what "religion" is and of specific adaptations and transformations of religious ideas and values. Media are now (also) to be understood as "sensory technologies" that extend traditional forms of embodied religion in, for example, rituals, bodily modifications and initiations. All this has not produced a toning down of religious assertiveness or a sense of modernist relativism; on the contrary, it seems inevitably to have hardened boundaries and competition via challenging polemics in mosques and church compounds, on VCDs and on YouTube and other sites. Dramatic public performances and calls for conversion are prevalent. Consumers of religious images and messages in audio or visual form become more entrenched in the ideas and symbolism used: They internalize a different model of religious functioning and identity experience, but externalize it in the public sphere through emphatic performance.

As much recent work has shown, this in many cases also leads to a decline in trans-religious empathy or coexistence, and this is a challenge, particularly for the state order. This decline is visible in many interreligious contexts and in virtually every religious conflict in the world today. Studies along these lines have also shown how the versatile use of media has projected religious groups onto the national stage and into global cyberspace. The massive use of multiple media and the resulting fragmentation of (social and political) constituencies have clear implications for political theory and representative politics. This was demonstrated as early as in the so-called "Arab Spring" revolts.

A third core theme is that of religion and identity – or rather, the politics of religious identity in public spheres. This has become a strongly emphasized area of research in African Studies, informed by global discussions on religious competition, postcolonial state identity, (multiple) modernity as a socio-economic phenomenon, and the problems of the secular state model. Such studies are in part informed by the refutation of one version of "secularization theory": In many developing countries – in contrast to Europe, for example – religion has *not* moved to the private sphere, and people have *not* become less religious or less vocal in the public domain; indeed, they have become more so. Religious identities are re-emerging and more emphatic. One example of religion's role in the politics of identity in Ethiopia is the Oromo people's Waaqeffata (see Osmond 2004.) In this modern version of a traditional belief, we see a political dimension in that Oromo pose Waaqeffata as a counter-reli-

gion to Christianity and Islam (seen as religions of hegemonic groups) and "return" to (what they see as) the "real, original Oromo religion" as a form of cultural nationalism, with underlying political aspects.

Religion as identity can obviously take on another face and demonstrate its potential as a channel for conflict generation, whereby an exclusivist discourse fuelled by absolutist notions of right and wrong is quickly produced. A recent example (from 2014) is the conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR), allegedly between Christians and Muslims, a violent confrontation in the wake of insurgent activities of a rebel group, which produced a communal war in which hundreds of members of both faiths attacked each other and were killed. People justified their violence by religion. The language was uncompromising, and the sudden, group-based hatred of the other, remarkable. The conflict was drawn along "religious" lines probably because in the CAR – for many analysts a "failed state" in a volatile region – the religious idiom was the only way to mobilize people. Clearly, issues of political, economic and regional disparity played a role, but apparently there was nothing else to "unite" people. In the absence of an effective state or legal-political order, religion by default becomes the prime identification mechanism.

The vast array of recent studies of religion in Africa shows notable progress and new levels of understanding, in terms of not only the cultural semantics but also how the religious and the political interact and are often mutually constituted. Current work combines analyses of meaning systems and of personal strategies of religious identification with the collective, organizational dimension. Studies of religion in Africa are thus more than ever geared towards a relational understanding and an analysis of its societal contexts of production, and much interesting work is being done on the particular articulations and adaptations of these traditional religions to new local contexts and global influences. On a personal note, when I studied rituals among the Me'en people in southwest Ethiopia in the 1990s, I made a fairly "local" study of their religion and did not have to contend with the presence of, for example, Evangelical-Pentecostal groups. I was able to describe a virtually autonomous local tradition that was concerned with ethno-religious rituals geared to Me'en cultural premises and group life, with strong environmental referents (Abbink 1995). At the time, what struck me was a well-rooted tradition of managing social and environmental relations within a community not so much concerned with cosmology or expressing a system of dogmas or with an ethics of in- and exclusion. Today, however, these same people are rapidly adjusting to religious "modernization" and have for the larger part adopted Evangelical beliefs – virtually

within *one* generation. The new faith, of course, has provided avenues of self-empowerment and connection to audiences and solidarity networks outside their own group. But their new elite spokesmen – often of the younger generation – have also turned inimical towards many of their own pre-conversion traditions. These two aspects of "worldview modernization" have been described often and account for much of the new religious dynamic in Africa. Clearly, they also extend into the political domain, especially in terms of the aforementioned identity politics.

The Public Sphere and Secular State in Africa

The fact of religion being an easily available and suitable "instrument" of mobilization, on the basis of perceived spiritual or divine forces recognized by people, has implications for the management of the "public sphere" – in other words, for the debates on the form and future of the secular state model still in place in many African countries. This is the main point I wish to discuss further.

In fact, a majority of African states have no state religion. Despite its ambiguous origin under colonial regimes, the "secular model" was held onto by postcolonial political leaders as they believed it would facilitate religious freedom and dampen religious conflict. The idea was that this – in principle, at least – would also spare the public sphere the aggressive rhetoric, competition and monopolizing discourse in the name of religion. We note, however, that African governments today grapple with this more and more, because religious pressures are increasing due to religion's growth as the primary identity of people there (cf. Diagne 2009; Igwe 2014). We saw this pressure in Kenya around both the adoption of the new 2010 constitution[5] and the recent family and marriage bills[6] (6), in Mali in the resistance to the new family law (withdrawn from the parliamentary vote) – not to mention the 2013–14 revolts in the north in the name of religion and ethnicity – and in South Africa, where religious interest groups pressured the state leadership and blamed the high rates of crime and violence on the "immoral secular order" (cf. Prozesky 2009). In Senegal, according to some analysts, the great vision of Léopold S. Senghor and his Muslim PM, Mamadou Dia, on the secular state and mod-

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5   Christian leaders opposed its allowing of abortion, the entrenchment of Islamic legal courts, and the limits on freedom of worship.

6   Contested by Muslims because it gave state law the upper hand over *shari'a* law on certain personal and family matters.

ernization has failed under their successors,[7] who allowed Islamic groups/ agendas to affect the government and blur the boundaries between state authority and the Muslim (Sufi) orders (Diagne 2009: 12).

Many problems connected to the secular state order in Africa are caused by regimes not observing the law they purport to uphold. They also selectively respond to religious pressure in order to divide and rule. Example cases can be cited from Tanzania, Uganda and Nigeria. In Ethiopia, where a notably increased number of violent incidents between believers of Muslim, Evangelical and Orthodox backgrounds was registered, it has been shown that the government often does not intervene in time or effectively sanction culprits. Such policies contribute to a decline in everyday practices of toleration and accommodation among Christians and Muslims and can lead to the subversion of the local social fabric.

None of the postcolonial deceptions in developing an efficient secular state that respects people's religious allegiances by definition invalidate the secular model as a regulative idea for the formal political arena. But the African context, where "public spheres" exist on various levels, indeed produces a different model for a possible secular accommodative arrangement. Religion manifests itself in multiple contexts – family law, constitutional preferences, civil and personal rights (relating to religious dress and gender relations, among other things), the scope and extent of religious expression in public media, propagandistic strategies of religious groups – and these public spheres are thereby reconfigured, "religionized" so to speak. Needless to say, the public sphere is not the same as the state, because laws, rules and state regulations are subject to a different, more formal debate in the legislature (parliament) or within the executive branch, and are the result of a kind of "adaptation/conversion" process for which the happenings in the public sphere provide the input (Habermas 2011: 25-26). In addition, in Africa the pressure to expand religious demands to the "public sphere" will regularly be met by controversy and resistance. It is not at all certain that abandoning the secular statute of a state based on the demand of a religious majority will work in the latter's favour or enhance the free observance of religion. Interesting in the recent, more than two-year-long confrontation between the Muslim community and the state in Ethiopia is that the Muslims demanded religious freedom and non-interference from the government on the basis of the secular model: They demand that it be respected, not abrogated (Abbink 2014).

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7   Many Senegalese recall with irritation the moment when the then President Abdoulaye Wade prostrated himself before the leader of the Muslim Mouride Brotherhood back in December 2007, a highly symbolic act. See Seck 2010.

Religion and the Public Sphere in Africa: Secularization?

So, what is happening in the public sphere: secularization, or more religious colouring?

While religion is becoming more important in African life, this is a process that creates new challenges for society. Demands from various religious constituencies towards the public sphere and the state are growing, and this creates inevitable friction, first because the state elites emanate from dominant groups within the population and need to meet the demands of their constituency. They are susceptible to informal political pressure, often via patron–client links. Second, parochial narratives clash, all the more so when the legal order of a state is not secular but has recognized one religion as the "state religion". This puts the status of "the secular" in doubt.

Of course, the terms "secular" and "secularization" need to be approached cautiously.[8] What is obviously refuted in sociological-religious studies is the strong version of the secularization thesis (Casanova 2006a): the modernization and rationalization of life do *not* universally make religion irrelevant – there is no inevitable process of peoples/societies losing or neglecting religious faith under these conditions. As a social fact, secularization does occur in certain historical epochs, but is dependent on certain specific conditions and processes. Obviously, in phases of Western societal development since the massive industrialization of the late nineteenth century, secularization in the above sense *has* occurred, coupled with a gradual expansion of the idea of "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*) of the world, in Max Weber's terms, and a decentring of God as an active force in planetary and human history.

Another version of the secularization thesis, stating that religion under modernization and affluence is relegated entirely to the "private sphere", has not been corroborated either: Witness the case of the USA.

But the third version of the theory, that religious institutions and norms are gradually differentiated from statecraft and governance (Casanova 2006a: 12), is still plausible and upheld by many cases, notably in Europe and India, but also in Africa. It provides the possibility of a secular state model in a religious society, and this was actively pursued as a political ideal in postcolonial Africa. Several proponents of this view state as the

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8   I will not go into the long anthropological debates on this term following the major contribution of Talal Asad in his book *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford 2003), but his approach has led to very fruitful reconsiderations and revisions of the subject and has redefined the research agenda.

reason for a secular statute that religion is not a purely benign, untouchable domain of life that would or should be off-limits to law-giving by the state.

There is no decisive argument that would refute the value of a secular state as a model in interreligious politics and accommodation; it may still hold promise for the equitable treatment of religious communities and institutionalization of religious freedoms for two main reasons:

- Pervasive diversity of religious and other worldviews in Africa is an incontrovertible fact. This is even the case in so-called "100 per cent Muslim" countries, because there the fault lines lie between Shi'ism and Sunnism, diverse schools of Islamic law, relevant ethnicities, and various strands and sects such as the Ahmadiyya, Isma'ilis, Alawites, Druze and others. Come what may, a neutral political order would, theoretically speaking, do justice to the recognition of diversity and of the need to work out structures of tolerance.
- There are also citizenship issues at play: Whatever concept of citizenship is pursued by a state, it is always defined beyond people's religious identity.[9]

This story holds for Africa in general, and also specifically for northeast Africa. In particular, one could claim that in the aforementioned conflict between the Muslim community and the Ethiopian state – with key Muslim leaders still on trial – an improved secular state model can be workable. It is upheld by Muslims as the constitutional ideal which they claim they respect but the government does not (Abbink 2014). That respect is probably conditional on a state's democratic dispensation and on its upholding minimum constitutional principles on human, citizens' and community rights.

Religion as Political Debate?
Challenges for the Future

The "public spheres" in Africa are dominated by multiple discourses, and it appears that today discourses dominated by religion can be expressed more freely than those dominated by politics. Religious freedoms seem to legally and practically hold priority over media and political freedoms, which are strongly restricted in countries such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan and Eritrea. How do these religious products and exchanges dominate the public sphere in Africa? How far is their expansion allowed to go? Is there

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9   In addition, the formal secularism of the state may be a good façade behind which to push informal, pragmatic politics towards workable deals, without recourse to "inappropriate" religious justification.

a future for the secularism that is nominally declared? Many misunder-
standings about the concept exist, in Africa and among analysts, many of
whom declared this idea dead "because of" the presence and force of
religion. The purpose of secularism, however, is to fill the need for coex-
istence in the face of a social landscape of durable diversity and pluralism
(see Scott 2000). Religion-based claims invite regulation in the context of
wider national agendas or in that of determining the state's identity as a
policy arena where other legitimizing discourses are also present. The
"secular challenge" thus will not go away, because the alternative, a faith-
based polity – such as in Ethiopia in the days of the Christian empire with
the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as the state church, and such as we still
have with "state Islam" in Sudan and in northern Nigerian states – is not a
clear-cut or acceptable case for all citizens, pluralist as they are in their
loyalties, cultural commitments and views on religious identity, even within
their own faith community. And the record of such more "theocratically"
based polities, like today's Sudan, is not good at all, in view of the ongoing
slaughter of fellow Muslims in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains, and given
the repressive domestic politics (see also Keddie 2003: 30).

In addition, as Leo Igwe (2014) and others have recently noted,
there has been a systematic underestimation of the formulas of what we
would now call "secularism", or more "worldly" power, that existed in
traditional/precolonial African societies. For instance, in Somalia, the
religious leader (*wadaad*) was clearly distinguished from the political/war
leader (*waranle*) (Lewis 1963), who had a different "job description".
When I did research among the agro-pastoral Suri people in southwest
Ethiopia, I noted a similar dualism, and when I asked if the priest-like
ritual leader (*komoru*) would not also be better as the political leader of
the Suri in their relations with, for example, the government, I received a
negative reply. The *komoru* had his own domain, and the administration
of business, political matters or war with neighbouring groups was the
domain of the reigning spokesmen of the age set, although the latter did
not mind being "blessed" by the *komoru*.[10]

A case could be made that the problem of state-religious rule came
to the fore only in the colonial period, as colonial states usually imported
a package deal whereby (the Christian) religion was allied to their rule. Its
status was viewed ambivalently and often evoked resistance. Before the
colonial state, Muslim conquerors – for instance, in West Africa – did
the same, importing a new ideology of theocratic rule that was somewhat

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10   A similar but more intricate structure is found among the Boran Oromo in Ethio-
      pia and Kenya and their *gaadaa* age-grading system and indigenous religion.

problematic.[11] The examples I mentioned earlier of Gamo and Suri are just a few illustrating that political-administrative and religious performance were not the same thing in many parts of Africa (Igwe 2014).

The modern postcolonial state regularly "problematized" the relationship between religious office holders and the state administration. But the state is bound to the constitutional principles nominally declared by itself, and is increasingly globalized in its juridical orientation. It needs a kind of religion–state separation, or at least mutual positioning, in the policy arena. It is possible to build on the traditions recognizing the two different domains, as in the examples above, to work out new models of interaction – again, to do justice to the religious and worldview pluralism that will not go away. Nonetheless, political expediency, informal power politics of local elites, and failing service provision by the modern state have undermined the viability of this effort.

A very obvious feature of religious competition today, which demonstrates the dilemmas of religion in the public sphere, are the "sound wars", the amplified proclamations of faith-based messages in urban space, emanating from prayer houses, churches and mosques. This style of "communication" emerged in the era of political liberalization, especially since the early 1990s, and rapidly capitalized on technological-mechanical innovations in media. The sound battles clearly go beyond the mere signalling function of religious messages (to, for example, indicate the beginning of a service): Now entire services are broadcast via loudspeakers to willing and unwilling listeners any time. This is a paradoxical and literal case of religion in the public space, as it is often infringing on the rights of others and not in accordance with national laws.[12] These sound wars have not yet been the subject of much research, but they seem to be a form of intimidation, and may reflect a concrete case of mimetic rivalry, in René Girard's words (Girard 1987; cf. also Tincq 2001), between religious groups not wanting to "give in" and attempting to reassert their public presence. Field research would be needed to find out more about the motives for acoustic overproduction, the nature of the transmitted "religious" messages that has changed over time, the apparent intimidation of the state authorities, and the effects on public policy, health[13] and interfaith relations – for one, the

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11   Reflections of this can be seen in the famous film by Ousmane Sembène, *Ceddo* (1977), online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ipcync79CI> (10 April 2014).

12   For example, in Ethiopia there is a legal injunction (one rarely enforced) to keep religious sound within certain limits.

13   See Armah et al. (2010). Also, the denials by religious leaders in Kenya and Nigeria, cited in Fayali 2012 and Macharia 2009, and the comment "Don't

rapid escalation of violent clashes. Interestingly, community responses towards the acoustic onslaught are not only positive or indifferent, and indeed some voices are emerging to curb the trend.

In this respect, the core of this "secular challenge" (or challenge of pluralism) is nicely summed up by Jürgen Habermas:

> It is not enough to rely on the mere benevolence of a secularized authority that now tolerates minorities hitherto discriminated against. The parties concerned must themselves reach agreement on the precarious delimitations between a positive liberty to practise one's own religion and the negative liberty to remain spared of the religious practices of the others. (Habermas 2005: 101)

African states, and many others,[14] have not overcome or effectively regulated this problem of protecting the liberty of citizens to be "spared the religious practices of the others" – due to either lack of interest or cautious fear of aggravating tensions or overlegislating religious life. But this attitude/policy allows believers, and their elites, to constantly expand the scope of religious presence into the public domain even when that is not called for by relevant doctrine.

This situation means we must further explore the conditions and varieties of the secular state model that is faced with worldview diversity and challenges to "citizenship" (see also Casanova 2014). We should relate this quest to studying the conditions of the production and "learning" of religious adherence and expression, and here a strong link with the analysis of social and economic processes is needed, because religious adherence and choice are to be interpreted not only mentalistically (ideologically) but also pragmatically, within contexts where material interests are at stake. Needless to say, belonging to or switching to a new religious group may offer another social network of contacts and opportunities: very important in conditions of insecurity, economic deprivation and failing rule-of-law guarantees.

Meanwhile, scholarly debate on secularization has made clear that conventional underlying conceptions on the nature of religion were disproportionately based on Christian and Islamic normative models that emphasized theology, sacred texts, prescriptive liturgy, personal conviction and doctrine as the "core" of religion. Religious experience is much broader than that and best understood when its entire range of expression

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Ignore Noise Pollution" in the Ethiopian weekly *The Reporter,* 7 September 2013, online: <www.thereporterethiopia.com/index.php/opinion/letter-to-the-editor/item/938-dont-ignore-noise-pollution> (13 April 2014).

14   See, e.g., Weiner 2009 on the US, and Khan 2011 on Pakistan.

is recognized. This means taking into account the embodied practices, the behavioural routines and the objects and images meant to evoke the presence of divine or non-visible forces. This all goes beyond the classic theological view of religion and moves towards an appraisal of it as culture, as a psychosocially rooted repertoire that informs behaviour patterns and is constituted in social action. This makes it indeed much more difficult to follow the classic secular political ideal of "separating" religion and state. For instance, the (over)production of acoustic religious noise is defended by believers as being "necessary" to their religious expression – despite the fact that it is not acceptable to other believers. Many other examples of problematic, "expansive" practices of religion can be adduced.[15] The challenge is, following Habermas' call cited above, to put into effect reasonable restraint (see also Habermas 2011).

Finding an easy and one-size-fits-all "solution" of how to define the political-legal relationship between religion and state, and/or what has come to be known as the public sphere, is not possible. In the rest of the world, including the West (cf. discussions in Mendieta and VanAntwerpen 2011), this is also a durable point of contention. But the idea that religion in African societies always enters politics via the widely held belief that the spiritual, non-visible world is one with the observable world and influences people's actions does not imply that "regulation" or understanding of religion does not have to be negotiated. As stated earlier, the very fact of the enduring plurality of worldviews, aims and aspirations makes this negotiation a necessity. It is not difficult to comprehend that Muslims cannot accept policy or public domain claims by Christians on the basis of Christian theological motives, and the same is true vice versa. Traditional religionists would have trouble with both, not to mention with agnostics or other minorities. In fact, vehement public polemics regularly flare up on this. Such an appeal to specific religious motivations in the public arena – but more seriously, especially in the formal political arena of a parliament – would be, as philosopher Richard Rorty has said (1999, 2003), a "conversation stopper": Nothing more can be said if someone says, "This law or rule must be imposed because it is the will of God/Allah." Religious people acting as such in the political arena cannot/will not discuss dearly held first principles of their faith.

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15   See Hackett 2005 (79-80) on the emergence of forms of "separationism and demonisation of religious others", and Hackett 2011 (874) on the "barrage of accusations of Satanism from Africa's ever-burgeoning evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic sector".

But for the other denominations, these principles are unacceptable.[16] If these value statements leave the public sphere and enter formal political debate and decision-making, the secular state would be in danger. Philosophically speaking, appeals to "justification" on the basis of religious or any non-arguable belief are non-applicable.

The development of a balanced formula of public-political representation of religious communities within the African state[17] has often been hindered by the failings of democratic decision-making, lack of juridical equity, and informal pressure politics. The wave of democratization since the early 1990s has led to a paradoxical result: greater religious freedoms, but also more political impasses – in only a few countries are deliberative-democratic systems solidly in place. Religion now seems the alternative discourse of "empowerment", but its nature and limits in public space within the African state are not well defined.[18] That people are empowered via their religious affiliation rather than via politics is certainly true[19] but does not obviate the need for the political sphere or the state to facilitate this "empowerment" for all the different religious groups and thereby to regulate it.

We have already seen (following Casanova 2006a, b) that modernization has not led to secularization in the sense of a loss of religious faith and relegation of it to the private sphere everywhere, least so in Africa. This is not the standard, and in that respect a "post-secularization" theory is called for. But, as for instance the Muslim protests in Ethiopia have made clear, the normative secular state model is not dead. The popular protests and backlash in Egypt against President Morsi's politics in 2013 have also illustrated this. In a way, the Egyptian case may even

16   They could only join on shared religiously motivated concerns, e.g., opposition to abortion rights, gay rights, women's rights, etc. – as they often did.

17   This need for accommodative negotiation in the political sphere is of course also separate from the problems of evaluating the *truth claims* that religions also inherently possess, as explanatory blueprints to ultimate reality, about human values and, perhaps, as the sole code of morality or ethics. But, as Habermas (2011: 25, 27) suggests, religions have truth claims and moral intuitions that do contribute to public sphere debates, although they need "translation" – discursive adaptation – to be taken up by larger audiences in society.

18   This is due partly to the problems and lack of scope that civil society has: as in Ethiopia, where legal restrictions and repression (2009 NGO law) have prevented meaningful dialogue and experimentation with civic action by social, ethnic and religious groups.

19   For example, the successful Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria, or the Qale Hiwot Evangelical Church in Ethiopia, which undertake major social and economic initiatives.

be crucial for global debates on the public sphere and secularism, and notably in the Muslim world. In general, the secular regime should be developed and adapted to African conditions, recognizing that religious life in Africa is ubiquitous in its material, auditory and visual-performative dimensions.

In line with recent findings from African political anthropology, to elaborate an overarching constitutional state structure that gives religious communities recognition and power and tolerates their performance would be more successful if *continuity* with the past and existing religious traditions is respected – not only Christian and Muslim traditions, but also the heritage of ethno-religious, "traditional" belief systems. These traditions still define the cultural and personal commitments of the majority of citizens, though it is difficult to see how one of them could claim ultimate hegemony over others. Religious freedom does not imply that a non-secular state order is called for: Perhaps indeed the opposite is true.[20] There are numerous examples of religion-based constituencies that ban certain key policy issues from the political agenda, and that is problematic, to say the least. I am reminded of religious groups, in Ethiopia and elsewhere, who have tried to prevent debates about environmental and population policies and gender rights. But despite the need to regulate religious freedom in a neutral political dispensation, and despite the presence of the political and cultural heritage necessary to constructively deal with this issue, processes of negotiation over such an order are not always pursued effectively in Africa, because state political expediency and opportunism, and sometimes foreign interference, prevent this.

To recapitulate, a secular statute does not necessarily deny or oppose the religiosity of the African public but aims to mediate potential value conflict. In fact, the more religious people become, the more the need may arise for a secular state order where each person can be his or her religious self. But this order can only be a precarious, negotiated one, where identities are "nested" and recognized on various levels (subsumed under the "citizenship" concept). This debate will be with us throughout the coming decades and will stimulate civic and political "engineering" in Africa.[21]

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20   Hackett (2011: 878) has the tendency to "absolutize" the right to religious freedom. But religion is not sacrosanct or above the law, because its values and precepts frequently clash with broader human rights values of the modern global age and thus need mediated adjustment. See also Eberle's excellent argument (2009).

21   But probably the classic secular state model – developed in Europe and the US, but also taken up by India in 1948 – with a full "separation" of religion and state functions, will not be emulated.

Religious identities in Africa will persist in claiming people's allegiance, providing frames of meaning and practice for many, and continue to function as channels for the politics of identity, including the more violent varieties. Religious agendas thus will always challenge African political regimes, urging innovative models of a secular, or perhaps "postsecular", state that may allow the performance of religious identities in visual and material form and their controlled inclusion in consultative public or political discourse. But, to come back to Habermas (2011: 64), they still need a kind of "translation".[22] Absent this, aggressive, direct confrontations would be the order of the day. Of course, in any secular state context the mere "toleration" of the expressions and materialities of religion – public performances, the practical aspects, the soundscape, the ritual practices – is never all there is to it, because religions always remain "statements", with a clear ideational content which also is publicly evaluated, in the sense of being criticized and debated. But this is exactly why a renewed secular legal order is needed and would have a future in Africa, however dominant religious worldviews may continue to be.

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22   An appraisal of religion's role also needs, in the same author's words, a "postmetaphysical" approach, refraining from "passing ontological statements on the constitution of the whole of beings" (Habermas 2005: 106).

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Religion und Politik in Afrika: Die Zukunft des "Säkularen"

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Essay widmet sich der nach wie vor großen Bedeutung der Religion in Afrika, nicht nur in Bezug auf die Anzahl der Gläubigen, sondern auch in Bezug auf die Varianten religiöser Erfahrung und ihre Verbindungen zu Politik und Öffentlichkeit. Parallel zur Demokratisierungswelle und zur ökonomischen Liberalisierung seit den 1990er Jahren wurde Religion öffentlich immer präsenter und wurde in der Politik immer stärker Bezug auf Religion genommen. Neben „Entwicklung" wird Religion in den politischen Debatten auf dem Kontinent ein wichtiges Thema bleiben. Die erneute Präsenz von Religion im öffentlichen Raum hat zu einem neuen Verständnis ihrer Bedeutung bei der Bildung von Weltsichten und politischen Identitäten geführt. Damit werden auch die Herausforderungen auf der Tagesordnung bleiben, die mit der Rolle und dem Status von Religion in einem „säkularen Staatsmodell", wie es in den meisten Staaten Afrikas gewählt wurde, verbunden sind. Können diese von Gläubigen „bedrängten" Staaten ihre Neutralität gegenüber unterschiedlichen Weltsichten bewahren – und wenn ja, wie? Diese Fragen werden hier übergreifend diskutiert, aber unter Bezug auf Beispiele aus Afrika, die teilweise auf Erfahrungen des Autors während seiner Feldforschungen zurückgehen. Der Autor plädiert für die Entwicklung einer neuen Art des „Säkularstaats" in Afrika, in dem die religiösen Bindungen unterschiedlicher Bevölkerungsgruppen respektiert werden.

Schlagwörter: Afrika, Staat, Religion, soziokultureller Wandel, Wechselbeziehungen Religion und Politik, Sozialwissenschaften