A Reformed Missional Perspective on Secularism and Pluralism in Africa: Their Impact on African Christianity and the Revival of Traditional Religion

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Introduction

The process of secularization has shaken Christianity to its very core and is continuing to do so. When the question, wherefore missions? was debated in 1928 at the Jerusalem Conference, secularism and syncretism were seen as the two major threats to Christian missions. B. J. van der Walt, who in addition dubbed secularism to be the “mother of ideologies,” affirms this.¹ The germinating seed of secularism within Christendom can be traced back to the Middle Ages when the dualist Christianity of two realms (the natural and the super natural) received some prominence in the West. Secularism not only affects the West, but its effects are both huge and devastating in every continent of the world—including Africa—and democratic South Africa in particular.²

Closely related to the growing secularism in Africa is the spirit of pluralism. South Africa, with its rich heritage of cultural and ethnic diversity, has now become a more humanistic, pluralistic, and tolerant society. On the one hand, we are witnessing the phenomenal growth of Christianity—as is the case with Latin America and Asia—but, on the other hand we have also witnessed the growth of other religions. Statistics show that other faiths such as Islam, Hinduism, and traditional African religion are flourishing as well. The apartheid era recorded 77 percent Christians, 18 percent


² Africa is a vast continent with diverse peoples, and, therefore, I will limit myself to the example of democratic South Africa.
Traditionalists (also “no religion” and “object”), 1.7 percent Hindus, 1.1 percent Muslims, 0.4 percent Judaists, and 1.8 percent other non-Christian religions, while the 2001 statistics show much higher numbers in the growth of other religious traditions. All kinds of religions are vying for the African soul.

The growth of Christianity and other religions on the African soil can be attributed to the reality of African religiosity, perhaps summed up best by John Mbiti who noted that “Africans are notoriously religious.”

Religion is holistically integrated into the African worldview, and this can be attributed to the notion of religious consciousness (as explained in the theology of Johan Herman Bavinck). All Africans are very conscious of the existence of God, even though their response to him has been obscured by sin and consequently misdirected into the idolatry of ancestor worship.

There are two trends that I would like to pay special attention to with regard to the foregoing, namely: (1) that growing Christianity in Africa (and South Africa in particular) is marred or contaminated by secularism and dualism, and (2) that the growth of Christianity in Africa has also been accompanied by and challenged by the resurgence of the African Traditional Religion (ATR). Postcolonial and post-apartheid South Africa has witnessed the resurgence of the ATR in public life, and consequently we have seen more and more Christians who still consult the traditional healers and venerate the ancestors coming out into the open.

It is my thesis in this article that the development of secularism and pluralism in Africa, especially in South Africa, is one of the contributory factors toward the syncretism of African Christianity and the revival of traditional African religion. The process of secularization and pluralism in Africa provided fertile soil for the resurgence of the traditional religion in postcolonial Africa (and post-apartheid South Africa in particular), and this has also negatively impacted African Christianity. The aim of this article is therefore to provide a Reformed missional comment on the development of secularism and pluralism in Africa, their impact on African Christianity, and the resurgence of the traditional African religion. I will conclude by providing a reformational missional perspective through the eyes of J. H. Bavinck—the greatest Reformed missiologist of all time—as to how the church in mission can promote authentic African Christianity in the face of secularism, pluralism, and the revival of ATR.

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Secularism in Africa

Secularism Defined

The task of defining secularism is very complex because it is a phenomenon that takes various forms. Its definition is perhaps well-captured as follows:

Secularism, born from the atheistic notions of three centuries, is a subjectivist, relativist and utilitarian view—as well as the resulting state of affairs—according to which man is so-called free, independent and having come of age. Because of the part the particular powers which he has at his disposal, he has taken the place of God, who in his view has become superfluous, so that he can now live solely out of, by and toward this life which is closed off in itself.5

According to B. J. van der Walt, two forms of this “ism” can be distinguished: (1) a radical type that implies that people live as if God does not exist or, if he is there, does not matter anyway; and (2) a more moderate type—but no less dangerous—that teaches that God and belief in him does matter in private devotional life and in the church but not in the public square, which should be a secular sphere.6 Theologians such as Johannes Verkuyl, Abraham Kuyper, and Lesslie Newbigin all use the former definition.7 Hugo du Plessis concurred with these theologians when he defined secularism as the state in which the process of secularization is absolutized—“when culture, science and technology are taken as God-substitute.” In his line of thought, he concluded that we cannot divorce culture, science, and technology from the religious realm.8

Secularism and Secularization

A clear distinction should be made between secularization and secularism. Secularism is more of an ideology, while secularization is the process that leads to it.9 Secularization is the process through which everything considered to be secular is detached from the church. When this process takes place, humans rely mainly on their own knowledge and findings,

6 B. J. van der Walt, Religion and Society: Christian Involvement in the Public Square (Potchefstroom: IRS, 1999), 7.
considering God to be redundant. Consequently, they can no longer see the hand of God in their life, and they feel no need for salvation and blessing from God.\(^\text{10}\)

This process of secularization brings about the division between that which is secular and that which is not and that which is sacred and that which is not. Religion and culture are also divorced from one another. It presents Christendom in direct confrontation with the non-Christian religions, because it offers an opportunity for religious plurality.

### Secularism as a Danger to the Christian Faith

The danger of secularism to the Christian faith was identified at the Jerusalem Conference in 1928, as noted above. B. J. van der Walt, who affirmed this, provided three reasons why secularism in particular continues to be a threat to Christianity. In the first place, secularism is not an open enemy attacking the Christian faith with physical weaponry—it infiltrates and undermines faith in subtle ways. In the second place, secularism works gradually from the outside to the inside, so that the virus ultimately paralyses one in the heart. In the third place, secularism is also not a clearly discernible and definable phenomenon. It is a sort of chameleon ideology, the medium for the growth of a variety of ideologies—ideologies that in turn further promote the process of secularization.

### The African Face of Secularism

It must be noted that in the African continent the influence of Western culture, including its technological and scientific developments, can be cited as contributory factors to secularism. On the one hand, Western culture brought great benefits, but, on the other hand, it also brought negative implications. The division between the secular and the sacred, as propagated by secularism, has devastating effects on African Christianity. It has given birth to either nominal Christians or Christians who are syncretistic in their approach to life and the Christian faith. These are Christians who revert to the ATR whenever they are in crisis, thereby becoming syncretistic in their approach of religion.

Africa has followed Europe’s secularism. This secularism has in a sense produced a dualist African Christianity, as captured in the following words:

> In following most Western churches, life in Africa is divided into “spiritual” and “secular” spheres. There is a wide range of opinions concerning the relationship between these spheres, how they influence each other and which should enjoy preference. The more conservative Evangelicals of Africa allocate priority to the spiritual, the church and redemption. The “vertical” (the relationship to God) is the most important for them and all stress is

\(^{10}\) du Plessis, “Die Kerstening van die Bantoe,” 64–65.
therefore placed on evangelization (the gaining of souls for Christ). The Ecumenicals in Africa (the more liberal Christians), tend to think more “horizontally.” Good relations between people at the natural level are more important and they therefore strive for a more humanitarian society.\textsuperscript{11}

The tragedy with the evangelicals in Africa is that Christianity can be in the majority, yet it will never have a direct impact on society. Evangelicals seek to evangelize and win souls for Christ without realizing how humanity’s fall into sin affects one’s entire worldview and permeates the society around them. This helps explain why Christians, during apartheid South Africa, supported the apartheid system, in spite of being in the majority. The same applies now to democratic South Africa where Christians are still in the majority, but society is marred by corruption, high crime rates, family violence, abuse of women and children, the HIV and AIDS pandemic, poverty and unemployment, xenophobic attacks, and all kinds of social ills. This is perpetuated by Christians who narrow the gospel to its vertical dimensions—being very aggressive about winning souls, but at the same time being fairly passive when it comes to social involvement and renewal.\textsuperscript{12}

The tragedy with the ecumenicals is that they emphasize the horizontal dimensions of the gospel, disregarding the call to evangelize and the need for real conversion. In reality, they strive for a more humanitarian society, and their agenda to engage in missions is dominated or driven by the passion to address the social ills within their immediate environment. It can be concluded without doubt that the effects of secularism in Africa are dire and devastating. We now have a generation of Christians who, on the one hand, profess to be Christians, but, on the other hand, still hang on to the traditional beliefs, even when such practices contradict the gospel. In essence, the power of the gospel to bring total transformation is denied.

The foregoing leaves us no option but to agree with A. Shorter and E. Onyancha who concluded that the African face of secularism has taken four forms: (1) secularism as a worldview, which in theory and practice denies God’s presence in the world; (2) secularism as a division between a private sphere of subjective opinion and a sphere of public truth; (3) secularism as religious indifference; and (4) secularism as consumer materialism.\textsuperscript{13} With respect to the fourth form, Africa looks very powerless against the economic forces of Western capitalism. The current global crisis is a typical example wherein loss of properties and capital in America manifests itself in South Africa with the ever-increasing prices of crude oil and other commodities. American televangelists invade, bombarding Africans

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\item\textsuperscript{11} van der Walt, \textit{The Liberating Message}, 22.
\item\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 22.
\item\textsuperscript{13} A. Shorter and E. Onyancha, \textit{Secularism in Africa} (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997).
\end{itemize}
via their television screens with offers of healing and the riches of a prosperity gospel. Masses of people flock to emerging churches influenced by third wave Pentecostalism. In the spirit of consumerism, they swallow everything given to them without exercising a spirit of discernment.

**Pluralism in Africa**

**Pluralism Defined**

Pluralism presupposes that there is no absolute truth, and that truth is relative. When discussing religious pluralism, P. J. Buys noted that truth is different for every person and, therefore, all truths should be accepted.\(^\text{14}\) He continued to outline how those who promote pluralism embrace it as a phenomenon that is absolute, such that anyone (even Jesus) who is so narrow-minded as to say their religion is the only way to God is guilty of intolerance. As a result, pluralism can only take place within an environment where there is respect, accommodation, and tolerance of diverse viewpoints.

**Different Kinds of Pluralism**

Distinction can be made among different kinds of pluralism, and for the purpose of our discussions in this article the following can be mentioned:

**Cultural Plurality**

Culture is a dynamic system of life with three fundamental components: beliefs, values and outward forms.\(^\text{15}\) It is subject to change, adaptive, integrated, and ethnocentric. Culture is something that varies from one context to another, and it can be defined as the totality of learned and socially transmitted behavior informed by one's beliefs, values, and interaction with the world.\(^\text{16}\) In Africa, we are able to distinguish between two dominant forms of culture—traditional African and modern Western. It must be noted, however, that the traditional African culture is not a monoculture; there are universal characteristics but at the same time diverse traits or facets. Cultural plurality is a concept that can be used to refer to the traditional African culture. Democratic South Africa alone has eleven official languages (Afrikaans, English, Southern Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Afrikaans, English, Southern Ndebele, Northern Sotho,

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Southern Sotho, Swazi, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu) representing four ethnic groups (black, white, coloured, and Asian).

The cultural distinction that exists in Africa calls for cultural plurality; hence, the development of the theology of cultural plurality by Lesslie Newbigin, among others. The need for developing this type of theology is based on the assumption that it will help the church: (1) to construct sound intercultural strategies and methodologies; (2) to develop a model of dealing with the question of “unity in diversity” within the one body of Christ; and (3) to become involved in interreligious engagement in a secular pluralistic society such as democratic South Africa.

Structural Plurality

Structural pluralism maintains that there is diversity within societal structures: family, church, school, state, and so on. These structures relate to each other, but at the same time, we should note that each one of them is autonomous. B. J. van der Walt acknowledges that structural pluralism is rooted in the orderliness of God’s creation. Societal structures do not derive from human invention or contract, and these structures should respect each other, according to the principle of sphere sovereignty. In this way, different societal structures can cooperate in a relationship of partnership—otherwise the individual person’s life disintegrates. In the democratic South, structural plurality exists, but the state seems to have too much control over the spheres of family, church, school, and so on—treading on their rights and overruling them. For instance, the passing of a same-sex marriage bill into law ignored the fact that the majority of South Africans (families and churches) disapproved of it and regard it to be unethical.

Confessional or Religious Plurality

Confessional plurality seeks to acknowledge and respect the fact that there are diverse religious convictions in the world. This has come to be known as religious pluralism in the history of the Christian church. I will pay special attention to this kind of pluralism by outlining its historical background:

G. H. Anderson rightly noted that the debate surrounding the theology of mission in the twentieth century was also sharpened by the manner in which theologians responded toward men of other faiths. Hugo du
Plessis acknowledged that religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and many more were making inroads into the world scene during the twentieth century. Christianity was no longer seen as the sole way to God but as one truth among others. The emergence of the World Parliament of Religions in the nineteenth century and the World Congress of Faiths, led by Sir Francis Younghusband in 1936, ensured that people from different faiths joined hands to promote the spirit of fellowship among humankind through religion. They aimed at guiding humanity toward truth, the kingdom of righteousness, brotherhood, and peace.

The problem of religious pluralism became so intense that the Christian church could no longer afford the luxury of brushing it aside as superstition or childishness. Twentieth-century theologians dealt with this issue from diverse perspectives. Their approaches ranged from exclusivism to inclusivism to pluralism. Theologians such as Hans Küng opted for a relativistic approach toward the non-Christian religions whereby they concluded that all religions are paths to God in one way or another. This amounted to a universalistic approach to salvation.

Theologians such as Friedrich Heiler opted for the inclusivistic approach, whereby the non-Christian religions are seen as praeparatio evangelica. Christ is thought to have come to fulfill what is lacking in other religions. J. N. Farquhar joined the ranks of these theologians by maintaining that the Christian religion is the crown of Hinduism. However, Karl Barth, with his dialectic approach toward revelation and faith, opted for exclusivism based on total discontinuity between divine revelation and any form of human religion. No point of contact exists by nature. In a similar vein, Karl Heim influenced the International Missionary Conference held in Jerusalem in 1928 to opt for a position of an abiding paradox between the religions.

Theologians such as Emil Brunner maintained, on the one hand, the sufficiency of salvation in Christ and, on the other hand, the universal grace of God. Hendrik Kraemer, who had a great impact on the Tambaram conference of 1938, maintained that there is a point of contact with other religions for the gospel message. He encouraged so-called religious dialogue between the adherents of Christianity and the multiplicity of non-Christian religions. Mission was no longer seen as mere gospel proclamation but also as dialogue and liberation. Vatican II became the focal point in this debate.

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The African Face of Pluralism

Pluralism is a reality in Africa. The twentieth century was marked by the tremendous growth of Islam and many other religions.22 P. J. Buys acknowledges that the devastating civil, tribal, and religious wars in Africa prepared the way for religious pluralism.23 Pluralism in Africa is an irreversible fact. A closer look at democratic South Africa as an example highlights the following: (1) South Africa is a secular state that is grounded on principles of secular pluralism; (2) it is a country that seeks to protect the rights of every individual, including his or her language and culture; thus, clearly embracing cultural plurality; (3) it embraces structural pluralism insofar as it makes a clear distinction between societal structures and their sphere of operation; nevertheless, in some instances, the state seems to take power that belongs to other spheres; and (4) it embraces the notion of freedom of religion, thereby acknowledging confessional pluralism.

Confessional pluralism manifests itself in a number of ways in South Africa; for instance: (1) A state funeral is sometimes conducted in a Christian way because of the religious affiliation of the deceased or the deceased’s near-of-kin. (2) A state function may be opened with silent prayer, thereby affording people of diverse religious affiliations to pray without offending anyone. Alternatively, the leadership of various religious groups will participate in the proceedings according to the prescription of their religions. In this way, the state has encouraged blatant syncretism in the name of confessional plurality, especially when such proceedings were broadcast via television.

The foregoing demonstrates that confessional pluralism in South Africa makes room for religious ceremonies in state functions but with strings attached. Whatever is done must contribute toward the spirit of tolerance, accommodation, and the common good. Therefore, in essence, people who participate in such ceremonies must conform to the spirit of confessional pluralism lest they be accused of hypocrisy. Preaching and prayers offered in this context center on promoting a good moral life and nation-building, rather than declaring the essence of the gospel and calling people to conversion.

Secularism and Africa as outlined above is not only a present reality in Africa but is also contributing a great deal toward the resurgence of the African traditional religion(s) as outlined below:


Impact on the Revival of African Traditional Religion

The development and spread of secularism and pluralism in Africa can be listed as contributing factors toward the resurgence of African Traditional Religion, particularly in democratic South Africa. Although I use the phrase *African Traditional Religion* in the singular, I am fully conscious that expressions of this religion vary from one context to another, leading some theologians to use the phrase in the plural. In my view, it is possible to highlight several common characteristics and maintain the singular expression. The commonalities include, among others, belief in a transcendent God, a spiritual world, ancestral spirits, a hierarchy of powers, the notion of cosmic good and African communality, and the use of spiritual powers for good or bad. These characteristics are common across Africa, even if expressions of the characteristics vary. A brief example of the Vhavenda speaking people of South Africa can be used to illustrate this fact.

According to T. D. Mashau, the following can be said about the worldview of the Vhavenda people: 24 (1) The Vhavenda people believe in the mysterious deity who is called *Raluvhimba* or *Mwali*. (2) The general concept of human life among the Vhavenda people includes life after death because one goes to join the ancestors in the spirit world. (3) The Vhavenda people believe the spirit world is real. There are certain places throughout the Venda country that are known to be inhabited by the spirits. In actual fact, every chief has or had a forest or mountains in which the spirits of his ancestors are supposed to abide. Accordingly, many of these places are the actual burying places of the chiefs. Spirits of dead chiefs were believed to live in particular sacred groves, others in the mountains, in pools, and in streams. Lake Fundudzi is connected to the ancestor spirits of Netshiavha of the Tshiavha clan, which is the guardian of the lake. (4) The Vhavenda people believe in ancestral spirits known as *midzimu*. They are said to bring either benefits or misfortunes in the lives of their descendants. (5) The Vhavenda people perform certain rituals and also venerate the ancestors in order to appease them. (6) The Vhavenda people also believe in witchcraft. Accordingly, there is no misfortune that just occurs by itself. The major characteristics of the Vhavendas’ worldview and their religious system are common among all African tribes.

The practice of ATR in both colonial and apartheid South Africa had been relegated to the private sphere for two reasons: First, anything that had to do with the culture and religion of the African peoples was branded as evil by missionaries during the colonial period. Second, Christianity was a state religion during apartheid South Africa, and, therefore, the practice

of the ATR was not tolerated in public life. I know of areas in the region of Venda, in the Limpopo Province of South Africa, that had been declared mission stations where pagan practices such as *malombo* (the spiritual dance to invoke the ancestral spirits) were not tolerated at all. All of this changed in the dawn of the democratic era that saw South Africa become a secular and pluralistic society.

With the dawn of democracy in South Africa, secularism and pluralism gained new impetus. Christianity was no longer regarded as a state religion but as one of the many religions recognized and protected by the constitution of our country. Since the declaration of freedom of religions in South Africa, traditional African religion has been practiced more openly. Its rise has coincided with the call to revive the cultural heritage of the African people, a movement that aligned itself with the concept of an African renaissance propagated by the former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki. In his famous “I Am an African” speech of May 8, 1996, to the Constitutional Assembly of South Africa, the former president called for an African renaissance.\(^{25}\)

Mbeki’s call for an African renaissance was culturally and politically motivated, but, at the same time, it was a religious call to reincarnate the traditional religious systems, taking into consideration that (1) Africans are religious people; their religion permeates all of life. (2) Africans believe in God and have different names for him in their different cultural and language groups, namely, Mudzimu among the Vhavenda, Xikwembo among the Shangaans, Modimo among the Sothos, Nkulunkulu among the Zulus, and so on. (3) Africans believe in the spiritual world, including venerating or paying homage to their ancestors (the living dead). Heeding this call to find their traditional roots was supposed to help African people regain their African identity and take charge of their own destinies.

The call to revive the ATR and value systems has seen the emergence of a number of institutions or centers that seek to promote the indigenous knowledge systems and religion. The best example of this is the Kara Heritage Institute, which was established by the former Gauteng premier, Dr. Mathole Necherofo Motshekga, in 1982. This institute has gained tremendous prominence for its advocacy of traditional religious systems over against Christianity—a religion portrayed by some Africans in the postcolonial era as a Western religion, with the Bible as a Western book. The call for the revitalization of the *ubuntu*\(^{26}\) concept, which expresses the


\(^{26}\) The concept *ubuntu* embraces the spirit of African communality, “I am because we are.” This communality in African religiosity (from within the African Traditional Religion perspective) entails communion with the ancestors as well; hence, no distinction is made between the physical and the spiritual world in essence.
humanness of African people, is critical to the movement to revive traditional religions and their value systems. The *ubuntu* concept in an African context is a good concept that can be used to promote the Christian *koinonia*, but, as it stands in the movement to revive traditional African religion, it is biblically not acceptable. It seeks not only to promote communality among the living but also with the ancestors who are regarded in African religiosity as the living dead.

Adherents of the ATR can now practice their religion in public without any fear of victimization or otherwise. We have also witnessed in South Africa, on a number of occasions—including state functions—the performance of traditional rituals. Traditional doctors are now accorded the same status as doctors who trained within the scope of the Western medical system.

This rise and development of secularism and pluralism in Africa not only had an impact on the resurgence of the traditional religion but also on African Christianity.

**Impact on African Christianity**

Increased syncretism clearly points to the way in which secularism and pluralism have impacted African Christianity. Many black Africans are more comfortable within Christianity when some of their traditional beliefs such as the veneration to the ancestors are accommodated. In a meditation, Rev. G. M. Setiloane acknowledges that it is typical of African Christians to venerate their ancestors to the point that this defines their African identity. In his view, this is why many Africans find themselves more at home when in sectarian groups.27

I must confess that syncretism is rampant in South Africa, even among confessing members of Reformed churches. I was once invited to administer the sacraments in one of the Reformed churches in the neighborhood of Potchefstroom (northwest province, South Africa). As I was about to baptize two babies, I noted that both had amulets on their necks and ropes tied in their hands—obvious signs that their parents had either consulted the *sangomas* (witch doctors) or prophets (faith healers) of indigenous churches or one of the sectarian groups. My conscience did not allow me to continue, and I immediately interrupted the service by inviting the local pastor and elders together with the parents to join me in the consistory room. I explained to them why I could not continue with the baptism of the two children and encouraged the church council to seek ways to provide in-depth counsel to such parents. The parents responded by pointing out that they had consulted the traditional doctors in order to get protection for their children. They argued that it was part of their culture to

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protect their children and their properties against witchcraft and black magic by using articles given to them either by the traditional doctors or faith healers. I was shocked when some of the elders supported them and even threatened the pastor that they would withdraw their membership if he continued to invite pastors who refused to baptize their children.

There are numerous cases similar to the one above that can be enumerated, but the fact of the matter is that there are African Christians who still think that there is nothing wrong with consulting sangomas and faith healers and venerating the ancestors in order to appease their spirits. I remember one time when I visited another church in the same neighborhood and it was announced two Sundays in succession that there were members who had not come to church because they are attending to family affairs. I was irritated enough by the announcement to inquire of the pastor what was meant by family affairs, only to be told that the members concerned did not come because they were attending a ceremony to appease their ancestors. The pastor and church elders did not see anything wrong with making such announcements in the church because they saw nothing wrong with venerating the ancestors.

These selected examples show that secularism and pluralism are exercising enormous influence and having a devastating impact on African Christianity. Secularism—the final outcome of the dualism of the sacred and profane—is destructive in the sense that it does not reject the existence of God but separates the secular (everyday knowledge) from the sacred (religious faith). B. J. van der Walt is therefore right in noting that it makes belief and disbelief in God equally irrelevant to the practice of everyday life—in agriculture and farming; in politics; commerce, and industry; in sports and recreation; and in academic disciplines other than theology. That is why we still hear about cases of corruption, high crime rates, violence and abuse against women and children, tribalism, and many more injustices against humanity throughout Africa—even in nations such as South Africa and Kenya where Christians are in the majority. Secularism has created Christians who are Christians on Sunday or when they are wearing church garb (a tradition in some African churches). When they are at home or work, the same people who profess to be Christians see nothing wrong in perpetuating injustice against fellow humanity. For them, God does not exist outside the church walls in the economic, political, and other spheres.

Similar observations can be made with regard to pluralism in the African context. It has promoted a spirit of accommodation and tolerance to the point that it has become almost impossible for one to rebuke the spirit of syncretism without being accused of having a judgmental attitude. It has given birth to Christians who not only tolerate the practice of ancestral worship in their society but also participate actively in such practices.

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28 van der Walt, Transforming Power, 256–57.
Given this situation, it is imperative to provide some reformational comments as to what the church in mission can do. I will do this in the spirit of the theology of the great Reformed missiologist J. H. Bavinck.

**A Reformed Missional Perspective**

In fulfilling its calling, a missional church in Africa should be able to read and understand the spirits at work in such a time as this (1 John 4:1). This is in line with the call to discern the spirits as outlined in 1 John 4:1. Having exposed secularism and pluralism, I think the following directives will help us bring the gospel to a pluralistic society such as South Africa.

**Acknowledgement of Africans as Religious Beings**

Communication of the gospel among Africans should in the first place acknowledge that they are notoriously religious beings. All Africans believe that there is a God. The African concept of God is that of a God who is transcendent—the distant God who created and left his creation to exist by chance, the God who does not communicate much to his creation except by way of major national catastrophes or disasters.

The concept of religious consciousness as outlined in the theology of J. H. Bavinck is very relevant when approaching Africans who are still immersed in the African Traditional Religion.\(^{29}\) It can be used as a contact point in order to communicate the soteriological message to them. This is not an option for a missional church because the ATR, unlike the Christian faith, is not a soteriological religion. Christianity is a soteriological religion that has the unique message of salvation in and through Jesus Christ while other religions only mirror the fall of humanity, their rebellion against God, and their search for him that ends in idolatry. Thus, they must be converted. The African concept of God should therefore be viewed also as a repression of truth about God—useful to initiate conversation but not a doctrinal building block. According to Bavinck, the process of suppressing the truth about God is seen everywhere:

Man seeks God and at the same time flees from Him; man tries to get to know God, but at the same time he is busy obscuring the image he receives of God’s everlasting power and deity. Fear is the deepest cause of this. In his heart of hearts man has a vague sense that he is trying to fool God, and that he is guilty before God. Through this fear and this feeling of guilt he represses the image of God and replaces it by his own ideas. Man is, as Calvin said in his *Institutes, a fabrica idolorum*.\(^{30}\)

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\(^{30}\) Bavinck, *Church between Temple and Mosque*, 200–201.
A missional church among the Africans can view their traditional religions under the rubric of idolatry, yet should also take advantage of their religious consciousness to start a conversion that will lead toward calling them to repentance and service to God according to his prescriptions—faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

*Using African Religiosity as a Point of Contact*

Bavinck touches on the issue of the contact point when discussing the missionary’s approach to people of other faiths. He sees the method of confrontation that uses the point of contact as advantageous for the following reasons: First, one begins with what is already known and clearly understood by the audience. Second, and more importantly, the message of Christ is not set in a vacuum; it does not hang in the air or simply fall out of a strange world. The message is directly brought into contact with the old and familiar, with what had always been believed. Third, using the point of contact helps a Christian missionary or evangelist to approach the person of another faith with humility, rather than the superiority complex that accompanied many Western missionaries in the colonial period.31

*The Nearness of God Should Be Communicated*

God is a personal God, and, therefore, the concept of a God who is near should be communicated in a similar fashion to Acts 17 where Paul at the Areopagus witnessed to the God who is not far away. God should be proclaimed as the sovereign God who in Christ is our Immanuel (God with us). He reigns supreme through his Spirit and Word. In this way, African people would learn to know that their concept of a God who is far away from humanity is not scriptural.

*African Culture Must Be Respected*

A missional church cannot repeat the same mistake committed by early Christian missionaries who viewed everything that had to do with the African culture as inherently evil. All cultures should be seen in the same light before the eyes of God—inherently good by way of creation and inherently evil as a result of the fall into sin. There is no doubt whatsoever that when a church in mission approaches people of other cultures, a process of contextualization must take place, but the question is how far can it go. To what extent can the Christian faith accommodate or adjust itself to the customs, practices, and mores current among the targeted people? To answer this question, J. H. Bavinck accedes that adaptation or accommodation is not adequate as a solution to this problem. He puts this in the following words:

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The term “accommodation” is really not appropriate as a description of what actually ought to take place. It points to an adaptation to customs and practices essentially foreign to the gospel. Such an adaptation can scarcely lead to anything other than a syncretistic entity, a conglomeration of customs that can never form an essential unity. “Accommodation” connotes something of a denial, of a mutilation.32

Bavinck prefers to use the word possessio instead because he believes that the Christian life is to take the heathen forms of life into its own possession and make them new (versus accommodation or adaptation). He uses 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV) to substantiate his argument, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” Bavinck’s understanding of what Christ really does is summed up in the following words: Even though in external form there is much that resembles past practices, in reality everything has become new, the old has in essence passed away and the new has come. Christ takes the life of a people in his hands, he renews and re-establishes the distorted and deteriorated; he fills each thing, each word, and each practice with a new meaning and gives it a new direction.33 In the process of bringing the gospel to African culture, a missional church should note that there is a dire need, in the process of contextualization, to shape and redirect the good, while reforming the bad, so as to put all of it in service to the living God without compromising the essence of the gospel of Christ and also without making photocopies of the Western church and its theology. Bavinck rightly noted that missionaries must make a serious attempt to transplant the truth of the gospel to the foreign soil that they seek to serve.34

_Ancestral Worship Should Not Be Viewed Lightly_

When discussing the concept of possessio in practice, Bavinck uses the example of ancestral veneration in Japan:

In Japan, even as in China, the veneration of one’s ancestors constitutes a very important element in the national religion. And here and there at a certain time of the year, Christians gather as a family around the portrait of their dead relative or ancestor. The life and accomplishments of the one departed are then spoken of with respect. The Scriptures are then read, prayers are offered, and hymns are sung. In such practices something of the old is retained, and yet it is wrested free of its pagan moorings. To retain old customs in such a way, by enlisting them in service of Jesus Christ, is perfectly proper in my judgment.35

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32 Ibid., 178.
33 Ibid., 179.
35 Ibid., 186.
Bavinck is partly right in his approval of such practices if the church can guarantee that such practices will not indirectly lead to veneration—the practice they are seeking to discard. There is nothing wrong in holding memorial services for those who are no more, but the question remains as to how far you can go. This sounds to me as being churchification or Christianization of the traditional belief system. It does not help in all instances. The example cited above is also applicable in African countries, but one cannot take ancestral worship lightly as a Christian. It is a form of idolatry, and, with idols, one needs a total break. Christians can be encouraged to think of those who died, but not to pray to them, use them as mediators, or offer prayers on behalf of them. A missional church must always guard against the spirit of promoting syncretism, even if indirectly. Africans need to be taught unambiguously that the dead are not with us, and, therefore, they can no longer communicate with them, nor need they be afraid of their power to inflict harm on the living. Africans must be encouraged to put their trust in God and not their ancestors. The power of the cross and the resurrected power of Christ should be well communicated in this regard.

The Word of God Should Be Proclaimed Unambiguously

The Word of God should be brought to the black Africans as a message directed to them. It should speak to them in their own situation and bring light to it so that they can come to Christ through saving faith as worked in their hearts by the Holy Spirit through the pure proclamation of the gospel. Bavinck rightly noted: Preaching must thus be an encounter, an encounter not with a part of a person, not only with his reason, or with his poetic feeling, but an encounter with the entire person, with the whole man, as he exists in this world, as he is in flight from God, as he plays a role in that tremendous drama that is enacted between God and the rebellious human heart.  

The Proclamation of the Gospel Should Be Seen as a Power Encounter

Ancestral worship, belief in the spirit world, and occultism can no longer be dispelled as African myths. People are offering veneration on a daily basis, and some are being possessed by evil spirits in the process. The reality of this power encounter can be experienced when people are denied the right to be baptized and incorporated in the body of Christ by their families. In this case, a missional church should be able to proclaim the power of the cross. The power of the cross and Christ’s victory attained by his resurrection should empower them to engage without fear in this spiritual warfare. This is in line with what salvation means in J. H. Bavinck’s theology as recorded in the following words: “Salvation means first of all

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56 Ibid., 150.
that the guilt that rested on man and made him God’s enemy and a slave of the demonic powers has been taken away by the wholly mysterious event of the suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Humankind receives this salvation from God as a gift that makes all things new through Jesus Christ, but it also helps them deal with the power encounters effectively. Africans who are not only secularized, but who are also influenced by the resurgence of the ATR must hear this message of salvation that brings total deliverance even from demonic powers, witchcraft, and ancestral powers.

The Gospel Should Equip African Christians for Service

The church should preach about the kingdom of God, which is a present reality. People should be made aware that the first coming of Christ will finally be fully realized at his second coming. The kingdom gospel does not promote the spirit of withdrawal from the world but, rather, salvation that has an impact on one’s involvement in every sphere of society. According to Bavinck, salvation further implies a new attitude in life. This new life is a call to service whereby the Christian person will make an impact in all areas of life. He sums this up as follows: A new society must be created, and social life must be renewed through individual lives. The change in the heart of man must lead to a change in the community. When that takes place, circumstances, too, lose something of their force. A citizen of the Kingdom receives a certain independence from prosperity and adversity, illness and death. This message—that salvation concerns not only the human soul but also one’s entire being—must be communicated unambiguously to African Christians influenced by secularism and pluralism. Christians are called to lead an exemplary life in order to demonstrate that they are in Christ and Christ is in them through faith. African Christians must become Christians not just on Sunday or when they are putting on their church garb. The dichotomy between secular and sacred must be discarded. African Christians need to be encouraged to lead a Christlike lifestyle wherever God calls and places them in this world.

A Reformational Paradigm of Pluralism Should Be Communicated

The three kinds of plurality mentioned above should be distinguished but should not be separated. Africans should be encouraged to combine the religious and structural dimensions into a unique cultural configuration.

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37 Bavinck, Church between Temple and Mosque, 180.
38 Ibid., 181.
The Holistic Approach to Life Should Be Encouraged

Holistic understanding of life is already very much a part of the African worldview, and it should be encouraged. In essence, what is needed is an integral, holistic Christian worldview that contradicts and defies the spirit of a dualist Christian worldview. Christians must actively engage the world, yet with the full consciousness that they are not of the world. They must engage the world as Christians whose calling is to bring total transformation in society by the transforming power of the Spirit of God in Christ.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to look closely at secularism and pluralism in Africa and their impact on African Christianity and the resurgence of the ATR. It became clear in the foregoing that secularism and pluralism in Africa, and in democratic South Africa particularly, are real and present influences. They are enemies that are shaking African Christianity to its very foundations.

One can really see the influence of secularism in the above-mentioned syncretistic tendencies among members of Christian churches. It is a passive form of secularism that acknowledges the existence of a God but makes him irrelevant when people are confronted with misfortunes in their lives. In this case, various people are more afraid of ancestors than of God. Their ancestors are more real for them than is the transcendent God who only appears to them through national calamities. The absence of God in public life, politics, work places, and so on has resulted in African Christians’ perpetuating injustices such as family violence and abuse against women and children, sexuality promiscuity, corruption, and so on. The kind of pluralism that promotes a spirit of relativism toward truth promotes these troubles by cooperating with secularism for the resurgence of ATR throughout Africa and in South Africa particularly.

Although the influence of secularism and pluralism has been devastating, it is my Reformed conviction that a missional church can bring about change in this regard by propagating a Christian worldview that seeks to penetrate every society with the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ who sovereignly reigns through his Word and Spirit. Jesus Christ is able to transform all cultures. He creates for his people a new Christian culture wherein peoples from diverse cultures and language groups become members of his one family—the family of God.