Conference invitation and call for papers

‘Is Africa Incurably Religious? Secularization and Discipleship in Africa II’

Yaoundé, Cameroon, 7-9 November 2016

Background

In December 2014, the Reformed Mission League (Driebergen, the Netherlands) organized a small academic consultation at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo on ‘Secularization and Discipleship in Africa’. The choice of the conference theme was based on the conviction that discussions about Christian commitment and discipleship in Africa often focus too narrowly on issues related to syncretism with traditional African religions and challenges related to Islam, but neglect issues related to modernization, secularization and globalization. This first consultation confirmed the conviction that modernizing and secularizing influences are crucial for understanding the challenges facing Christian discipleship in Africa, but also that this area receives very little attention in academic research, theological reflection and church practice. The results of this first consultation were recently published in the online Cairo Journal of Theology and the concluding reflections are published as: Benno van den Toren and Willem J. de Wit, ‘Secularization and Discipleship in Africa: Conclusions and Recommendations’, Cairo Journal of Theology 2 (2015): 152–60.

Theme

One of the main questions of the first conference was whether Africa has its own ‘secularization stories’, stories that, in various ways, connect modernization to secularization. These stories have played a crucial role in the secularization process in Europe and have themselves contributed to and shaped the secularization process (see Herman J. Paul, ‘Secularization in Africa: A Research Desideratum’, Cairo Journal of Theology 2 (2015): 67–75). One of the unexpected outcomes of the conference was the realization that many Christians in Africa tell what could be called ‘anti-secularization stories’: Africa is an incurably religious continent; it resists secularization and will remain deeply religious; it therefore also has a divine calling to bring the Gospel back to the secularized world of Europe and North America, from which it earlier received the Gospel (cf. Jan Platvoet and Henk J. van Rinsum, ‘Is Africa Incurably Religious? Confessing and Contesting an Invention’, Exchange 32, no. 2 (2003): 123–53). Like the European secularization story, the African anti-secularization story shapes reality, but also has the tendency to mask aspects of reality. If one conceives of Africa as being deeply religious, processes of secularization – which may well be different from forms of secularization in the West – can easily be hidden from view and will not be taken seriously enough when thinking
about the challenges facing Christian commitment and discipleship in Africa. In this second conference, we want to continue these broader reflections on Secularization and Discipleship in Africa with a specific focus on the question: what does the belief that Africa is ‘incurably religious’ highlight and hide when we look at discipleship in Africa in the context of its traditions and its modernities?

*Invitation and Call for Papers*

This small English-speaking academic conference of approximately 25 people is aimed at theological educators and researchers, in Africa and beyond, with a heart for discipleship in Africa and at church leaders with academic interest. There are a small number of places available for doctoral candidates currently involved in PhD studies.

We invite both established scholars and doctoral students to send us proposals for academic papers they would like to present. We welcome papers on ‘Secularization and Discipleship in Africa’ and a number of other subthemes formulated at the last conference (please consult the paper ‘Secularization and Discipleship in Africa: Conclusions and Recommendations’ for the background to these questions).

First, we want to gain a deeper understanding of the narrative that Africa is deeply or incurably religious. 1. Where can this story and/or language be encountered and what form does it take? Who tells the story and what is their agenda? 2. How is it used to (re)define the relationship between Africa and Europe/North America? Who uses it to support Africa’s missionary calling and how do they do so? 3. How does it function as a hermeneutical lens through which its users understand African realities?

Second, the question of definition deserves further attention: what is an appropriate working definition of secularization in Africa, both for Muslim majority countries and other African countries?

Third, the causes and spread of secularization need further research. Questions to consider include the following: 1. Are there aspects of African Traditional Religions that might contribute to secularization? 2. Does urbanization contribute to secularization and, if so, how? 3. Does the media, including social media, have a secularizing influence and, if so, how? 4. Does education, particularly university level education, encourage secularization and, if so, how? 5. What do students (e.g., in Egypt or Ruanda) who read Western atheist authors make of them and how are they influenced by them? 6. What is the secularizing influence of Western theology and mission practices? 7. What does the experience of first and second generation emigrants from Africa to Europe and North America reveal about the relationship between the African religious experience and secularization?
Fourth, the discipleship and leadership programs of the churches in Africa deserve further study and evaluation in order to gauge their effectiveness in addressing secularization and other related matters. For example: 1. What does the church currently do about secularizing influences and is it effective? 2. How do existing discipleship programs compare in terms of their biblical faithfulness, contextual relevance, and general effectiveness? 3. How do existing leadership programs compare in terms of their biblical faithfulness, contextual relevance, and general effectiveness?

Finally, some more normative theological questions call for deeper reflection: 1. What should Christian commitment, faithfulness, and discipleship in Africa look like? 2. How is God present in the business of everyday life? How should we think of God’s presence and activity in the created order, and is there possibly a via media between Western secularization and the (re)sacralization of the world as seen, for example, in African Independent and Neo-Pentecostal Churches? 3. What can we learn from Neo-Pentecostalism’s strong connections to both the African past and modern urban Africa, and are there aspects of this movement that Christians should be wary about?

Confirmed Speakers

- Dr. Eloi Messi-Metogo, Université Catholique de l’Afrique Centrale, Cameroon
- Dr. Nupanga Weanzana, Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui, CAR/Cameroon
- Dr. Abel Ngarsoulede, Faculté de Théologie Evangélique Shalom, Tchad
- Dr. David Bjork, Université de Yaoundé 1, Cameroon
- Dr. Klaas Bom, Protestant Theological University, the Netherlands
- Dr. Benno van den Toren, Protestant Theological University, the Netherlands

Cost and Scholarships

The conference will be in English but the location of the conference will be in Yaoundé, a French-speaking city. We hope this will encourage conversation and collaboration between theologians from French-speaking and English–speaking Africa, who have few opportunities to meet and are often engaged in different theological discourses.

We are grateful to SIL Cameroon for the opportunity to hold the conference on their CTS premises. The cost of participation at the conference is set at 90 EUR or 60.000 FCFA (including lodging for two nights). There are a limited number of scholarships available, both for the cost of the conference itself and for airfares, particularly for those who intend to present papers. We encourage scholars from both Africa and Europe to apply for scholarships with a view to engaging in a truly intercultural conversation concerning these important questions.

Organization
This conference is organized jointly by:

- the research unit ‘Science and Religion in French-Speaking Africa’ at the Protestant Theological University (Groningen, the Netherlands), sponsored by the Templeton World Charity Foundation
- the Reformed Mission League, Driebergen, the Netherlands (RML/GZB) and
- the Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui (Yaoundé Campus).

It is furthermore supported by:

- The Protestant Theological University (Amsterdam and Groningen, the Netherlands)
- Kerk in Actie (Utrecht, the Netherlands), the Mission Board of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

*Contact and Timetable*

1 August 2016: final date for (1) applications, (2) the submission of paper proposals (200-300 words) and (3) scholarship applications (for the latter, please include a letter of motivation for attending the conference and add an estimate of travel expenses).

1 September 2016: final date for confirmation of admission, acceptance of paper proposals and notification of scholarships.

For paper proposals, please contact: Dr. Benno van den Toren, Professor of Intercultural Theology: b.vanden.toren@pthu.nl.

For applications, scholarship requests and practical information concerning invitation letters, lodging and travel, please contact Mrs. Lynda Zegha: lyndazegha@yahoo.fr.

Readers are encouraged to share this invitation and call for papers with other individuals and institutions who may be interested.

Dr. Benno van den Toren, June 2016