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Secularisation and Spirituality among Lapsed-Christian Young Adults in Nairobi: An Exploratory Study of the Antecedents, Triggers, and Response

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Abstract: African scholars have claimed that African peoples are "notoriously religious". Is this still the case? Empirical literature on the subject is meagre. Therefore, the objective of this study was to examine the antecedents, triggers and response of secularisation and spirituality among lapsed-Christian young adults in Nairobi, Kenya, the participants were aged between 18 and 35, who were baptised but have abandoned Christian faith in favour of secularisation or non-affiliated spirituality. Qualitative data, from semi-structured in-depth interviews among the 14 participants, sampled through a snowball process, was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed by the two authors. Eleven emerging themes were identified from 10 h of data. The first two themes suggest that mixed faith backgrounds of parents and discordant relationship within the family act as antecedents in adopting a secular perspective. The next two themes relate to the role of Christianity itself in terms of lack of faith formation and exaggeration of religiosity. The fifth and sixth themes revolve around trauma in Africa/Kenya, historical and contemporary. There were two themes pertaining to ill-treatment meted out by Christianity. The rest of the themes relate to how these individuals maintain meaning, value and spiritual systems. The findings are likely to generate an evidence-based discussion among religious leaders in Africa/Kenya.

Keywords: secularisation in Kenya; atheism in Africa; young adults and secularisation; morality among atheists

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1. Introduction

Within the discourse of religion and spirituality in Africa, it is assumed to be a truism that "Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices... African peoples do not know how to exist without religion." (Mbiti 1969, pp. 1–2). This oft-quoted classical statement by one of the renowned scholars of African religions and philosophies had been previously corroborated by the observation of a non-African scholar, Parrinder ([1954] 1974, p. 9), who said, "What are the forces behind these surging peoples of Africa? One of the greatest forces has ever been the power of religion. 'This incurably religious people,' was a phrase often on the lips of many old [colonial] administrators." More recently, Magesa (2014) has revisited this theme raising a rhetoric question: what is not sacred in Africa?

Despite this rhetoric, academic discussion on secularisation in contemporary Africa goes back to the 1970s. Already in 1973, the Vatican convened a conference to discuss secularisation in Africa (Vatican 1973). After two decades, making a presentation at the symposium of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, Professor Jesse Mugambi (2000) drew heavily on Harvey Cox's ([1965] 2013) concept of secularisation and suggested that increased urbanisation of the African population is likely to lead to the relativisation of religious myths and symbols. As if to provide an empirical validation of this

conjecture, Shorter and Onyancha (1997) enumerated the indications of rising secularisation in urban Africa, with their case study of Nairobi.

They based their argument on the rise of a subculture among the younger generation of Nairobi that the authors called "matatu culture," which revolves around music, drugs, celebrities, fun, and "the lack of values". They also noted a fall in church attendance in some working-class areas. Declining church attendance might also be a fact among people on the other side of the socioeconomic divide in urban Africa, argues Van den Toren (2003), particularly among politicians who might only turn up for a show, and among the affluent and intellectual elite. He further suggests that the decline in church attendance alone may not account for secularisation, but we need to take into consideration the diminishing influence of religion on the lives of individuals and society. This position has also been supported by Paas (2019). In general, as Shorter (1997, p. 1) concluded, "secularism is rapidly becoming a more generalised phenomenon in the African continent, spreading from a small circle of privileged individuals to a whole society undergoing a spectacular evolution." However, in a more recent survey that examined the values, attitudes, concerns and aspirations of Kenyan youth aged between 18 and 35 (Awiti and Scott 2016), 85% of them claimed that they value their faith as one of first among what they valued most in life. Is this that straightforward or are there nuances to this simplistic claim?

One of the glaring indications of the throbs of secularisation in Kenya was the controversy around the legal registration of the Atheists in Kenya Society (Erupe 2018). In 2015, a group of Kenyans moved to register the Society. This application was initially rejected by the Deputy Registrar of Societies. However, in 2016, the Society was registered by the Registry. This was further suspended by the Attorney General due to pressure from some of the churches. Again, the suspension was challenged in the High Court of Kenya, which finally reinstated the Society in 2018. Since then, the Society has been lobbying for secular values based on rationalism and humanism, including the abolition of mandatory religious education in the Kenyan basic education curriculum.

This should not be treated as an isolated development. It might only be the tip of the iceberg confirming the anecdotal evidence emerging from frustrated Christian parents who claim that their children do not have time for religion anymore, and the increasing expressions of discontent with religion in Kenya, especially among young people (Nation 2020, July 2). The rise of atheism and the increased tendency towards secularisation call for a scientific empirical examination of the sociocultural situation of Christianity in Kenya, particularly in Nairobi, to understand the antecedents and triggers of the secularisation process. Yet, since Shorter and Onyancha (1997), there is no known empirical study on the issue.

Therefore, the general objective of the present study was to explore the antecedents, triggers and response in the process of secularisation among lapsed-Christian young adults in Nairobi city. 'Antecedents' refer to factors that precede a phenomenon. While antecedents might have some predictive value, it is not proper to attribute a causal relationship between the antecedent and the phenomenon. Besides the antecedents, the study did not focus on consequences but rather on response, aiming at understanding what might be happening within the phenomenon. In terms of population, the study was focused on 'lapsed-Christians.' These include those who were baptised in a church but have abandoned their Christian faith in favour of a non-religious spirituality or secularisation or atheism. The following paragraphs in this section briefly conceptualise two key variables of the study: young adulthood and secularisation. The section ends by listing the specific research questions in an attempt to operationalise this research.

1.1. Conceptualising Young Adulthood in Africa

"Youth" is a greasy term that slips out of the grip of any definition. Elsewhere, Selvam (2018) has discussed the fluidity of the concept, particularly in a pastoral context. For the purposes of this study, it is important to consider two terms related to youth: 'emerging adults' and 'young adults'.

Given the developments in the 20th Century that have prolonged youthhood, Arnett proposes "Emerging adulthood" as "a new conception of development for the period from the late teens through the twenties, with a focus on ages 18–25" (Arnett 2000, p. 469; see also Arnett 2014). He argues that this period in the development of individuals, since the second part of the 20th century, particularly in industrialised countries, has become a distinct phase. Emerging adults enjoy relative independence from social roles and normative expectations of childhood, yet they have not taken up enduring responsibility in the society in terms of marriage and parenthood. In urban Africa, the population of emerging adults is a blatant reality.

Closely related to 'emerging adult' is 'young adult'. Young adults are older than emerging adults. Though Levinson (1986) does not use the term, in delineating different stages of adult development, he speaks of 'early adulthood' lasting from about the age of 17 to 40. This stage is prior to midlife and late adulthood. The term, 'young adult' distinguishes that age group from those who belong to middle or late adulthood, who might be parents and grandparents. For the purposes of the present study, the term 'young adult' was used to include those aged from 18 to 35. This is also consistent with the definition of youth as furnished by the Kenyan constitutions. This age group when split into two or more subgroups will also shed insight into understanding the dynamics of sociocultural, religious transitions over almost two decades.

1.2. Understanding Secularisation

'Secularism' largely refers to a political position that calls for a total separation of religion from state and society. In secular states, religion is considered a private affair, and hence not to be of concern in the public domain. There could be two possible approaches within political secularism. In its milder form, state and religion co-exists in the same society without having anything to do with each other. In its extreme form, the states become intolerant towards any religious expression in the public. States and institutions that hold this position ban religious symbols from public spaces. Some of these states begin to develop a partiality towards agnosticism and rationalism (Norris and Inglehart 2011).

Related to the secular political positions, is 'secularisation' which individuals begin to adopt as a lifestyle, bereft of religious sentiments. This is an existential 'secularism.' For purposes of this study, secularisation is defined in simple terms as the "process in which religion loses social and cultural significance" for individuals (Lechner 2022). Secularisation is largely perceived as being peculiar to post-Christian societies (Berger 1967). A similar suggestion has been furnished by Max Weber ([1905] 2013), who alluded to the link between protestant reformation and the rise of rationalism, individualism, and capitalism. Sociologist Wright Mills' (1959, pp. 32–33) observation is at least partially true considering Western society:

> Once the world was filled with the sacred–in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm.

1.3. Specific Research Questions

Based on the above premises, the present study assumed that it is possible to explore the antecedents, triggers and response of secularisation in urban Africa, by listening to the lapsed-Christian young adults in Nairobi as the sample of the study. For purposes of the study, 'lapsed-Christians' were those who were baptised in any Christian tradition, but have abandoned their Christian faith and practice in favour of secularism or a non-Christian spirituality. In carrying out this exploratory study, we focused on the following specific research questions:

1. *Parental and Family Background:* Do mixed marriages of parents belonging to different Christian traditions, or their fervour in religiosity play any role in secularisation? What about the influence of discordant, divorced, separated, or single parents?
2. *Lack of Faith Formation:* Have they been part of any systematic Christian faith formation, yet tended towards secularisation? Does poor faith formation predict falling out?
3. *Exaggerated Religiosity:* What is the level of secularisation process among young adults who were exposed to some forms of exaggerated religiosity that had an impact on guilt and shame, or fear and brainwashing?
4. *African Literature:* Some 20th century African literature is generally critical of Christianity. They identify Christianity as a vehicle of colonialism and Westernisation. Does this have any possible influence on secularisation among young adults in Nairobi, who study these pieces of literature as part of their school curriculum?
5. *Personal Trauma:* Are there any histories of personal trauma associated with falling out of religious faith in Christianity?
6. *Moral Values:* What is the norm of morality among lapsed Christians? What motivates them to be good?
7. *Spirituality outside Christianity:* Are there some who adopt a spiritual orientation, including practices such as meditation, outside formal Christianity, while believing in or not in a personal God?

2. Method

This exploratory study was based on a set of qualitative data that were drawn from semi-structured in-depth interviews, among 14 participants (9 males, 5 females). The younger participants were 23 years old, and the oldest was 35; their average age was 29. There was one case of a 50-year-old who was interviewed as a key informant. Most participants were recruited through online advertising on social media. We also recruited a few lapsed-Christians from the WhatsApp group of the Atheists Society of Kenya. Through the ad, we called for "young people aged between 18 and 35, who were once Christians but are now atheists, secularists, or rationalists, or have embraced some non-Christian spirituality."

Additional participants were sampled through a snowball process by requesting the participants that we interviewed to suggest other similar participants. Snowball sampling "is a method of recruitment particularly suitable for identifying study participants with very specific characteristics, rare experiences or 'hidden' population groups who may be difficult to identify with other recruitment methods." (Hennink et al. 2011, p. 100). Since these situations apply to the present study, snowball sampling was the method of choice.

As for their religious background, the participants came from different Christian traditions (Catholics were six in number, three were Seventh Day Adventists, and others belonged to the Orthodox, Anglican, Salvation Army, Quaker, Full-Gospel/Evangelical traditions). In their level of education, except one who had completed his secondary schooling, others had achieved a diploma (n = 3), a bachelor's (n = 6), or a master's (n = 4) level of education. The interview guide had 10 queries based on the specific research questions, but rephrased in the 2nd person as open-ended questions. For instance, exploring the 1st set of research questions, we asked: "Tell us something about your parents: (a) what was their religious background and faith-life like? (b) what is your perception of the relationship between your parents?" The interviews were conducted face to face or online via zoom as per the convenience of the participant. Some interviews were conducted by both authors, but most interviews were conducted by the second author alone. Data from the semi-structured in-depth interviews ranging from 25 to 82 min (556 min in all, or almost 10 h) were transcribed verbatim by the second author.

The data on google docs was analysed systematically by the first author, following three steps (Neuman and Robson 2014; Selvam 2017): (a) open coding-identifying and coding texts that provided possible insights into the specific research questions; (b) axial coding–combining codes across interviews into common codes; and (c) thematic iden-

tification: summarising and finalising the themes with relevant evidence from the data. After interviewing and transcribing the data, the second author wrote out some memos in response to the specific research questions. These were looked at by the first author after the axial coding, thus corroborating his own findings. Then, both the authors held a discussion to agree on the themes reported in the results section below. Transparency and rigour in the process and collaborative analysis is said to improve the validity of the findings from the qualitative study (Yardley 2015). The research was approved by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation in Kenya (NACOSTI/P/22/15551). The participants filled in an online consent form with a standard ethical statement for research.

3. Results

The general objective of the study was to explore the antecedents, triggers and response in the adoption of secularisation and spirituality among lapsed-Christian young adults in Nairobi city. This general objective was elaborated in seven specific objectives as presented in the introduction of this article. In response to the specific objectives, 11 themes have been identified from the qualitative data. Each of these 11 themes is presented below with a summary generated by the authors, which is authenticated by one or two typical verbatim quotes from the participants. These themes are grouped under three categories: antecedents, triggers, and experience.

'Antecedents', as said above, refer to factors that lie before or together with the phenomenon. While they are perceived to influence the phenomenon, we cannot attribute a causal relationship between the antecedent and the phenomenon. 'Triggers' are immediate experiences of the participants that confound with the antecedents and elicit a particular response in the person. 'Response' consists of specific expressions of abandoning the Christian faith and/or practice in favour of secularisation or non-affiliated spirituality, and how the response is sustained in an ideological system outside the Christian framework, in terms of meaning, values, beliefs, and practices.

3.1. Antecedents

1. Parents' Mixed Religious Background

Parents of almost all participants of the study had mixed religious backgrounds, either professing different Christian traditions, as in most cases, or if they happened to belong to the same tradition, they were not committed to their faith in equal degrees.

For instance, Edel[1] (f, 50) says, "My mum was a staunch Catholic and brought us up as such. My dad was a Christian. (Laughs.) Um... growing up we weren't very sure which Christian he was, (laughs.) Uh, we knew him to be an Anglican or protestant... But eventually he identified himself as a Presbyterian."

For Jane (f, 28), her father was a church-goer, but the mother was not. Similarly, in the case of David (m, 23), his father was religious but "he kept switching from religion to religion;" his mother, though a Seventh Day Adventist, was not consistent in her Christian practice. The father died while David was still young. This might have also had some influence on his scepticism towards Christianity that he developed while he was 14. In the case of Mary (f, 34), the reverse was the case. Her dad had passed away while she was still young. She says,

> Ok, my mum's family is Catholic. My dad was Seventh Day Adventist. However, for us it's not something we were introduced to. My mum chose to raise us Catholic as opposed to Seventh Day Adventist. I don't remember him being religious. I don't think he even ever went to Church, ever.

These situations make the children question the value of their faith in their later adolescence and may be to abandon it altogether.

2. Parents' Discordant Relationship

Some of the participants in our study grew up with single mothers, either because their fathers died early or because the father abandoned the mother. There were also at least two

cases of participants who acknowledged that the parental relationship was not something that they were proud of as they were growing up. In some cases, the discordant relationship between parents becomes an antecedent for the individual to abandon their faith because they saw a contradiction between the faith-life of the parents and the relationship between them. Jane's (f, 28) father was almost a daily churchgoer in the Catholic tradition, while her mother was not very religious. However, their marriage, as Jane points out, was,

> not what you see in the movies, I think they should have left each other. Because they fight too much. Not physically, but verbally… They stayed together. Still, they do… but there is no communication! So, if I was to look back at my upbringing, I wouldn't say it was the healthiest in terms of emotions, but my physical needs were met. So, I was like, this Christianity I don't know if it is really for me, it is because I would see their actions, but I am like, these people, their actions don't really match their spiritual faith?

3. Lack of Faith Formation

When enquired, almost all participants of the study expressed their awareness of faith-formation programmes that are implemented in their church for children, adolescents, and youth. Seventh Day Adventists spoke of the Adventurers programme for children and Pathfinders for adolescents. The Catholics spoke of preparation for sacraments. There were two participants who followed the *Opus Dei* tradition within the Catholic Church; they mentioned the formation programme for different age groups, especially the *hodari* programme for boys and the *faida* club for girls in Nairobi. Others spoke of Sunday School or Bible Study programmes. In Kenyan schools and colleges, Catholics often participate in the Youth Catholic Students (YCS) association and non-Catholics participate in the Christian Union. Despite their awareness, not everyone actively participated in these programmes. For some participants in the study, their involvement was very peripheral. For others, their participation became a negative experience marked by an exaggerated unhealthy religiosity, which acted as an antecedent or trigger for drifting away from their faith-life.

Mary (f, 34), who now claims to be spiritual but not religious, was one of those who never participated in any of the formation programmes. For her, being a Catholic meant just going to church on Sundays and nothing more:

> You know, for us religion is not something that we ever focused on. It was on Sundays, we all go to church. And for us it just became we go for mass and life moves on, right? It's not something at all we were thinking about: what kind of a Catholic am I. Um, no. It was just a duty.

4. Exaggerated Religiosity

One consistent pattern that emerged in the findings of the study, as an antecedent to a critical attitude towards Christianity, was exaggerated religiosity during childhood and adolescence that border irrational superstition, or those that induce guilt and shame in individual.

Here is the case of Edel (f, 50), our key-informant. She grew up with a mother who was a staunch Catholic, while the father shunted rather indifferently between many Christian traditions. Edel was exposed to very rigorous forms of Catholic traditions starting with the *Opus Dei* during her early years of development; later, as a young adult, she developed a very strong devotion to Mary, participating in a group that claimed to have visions, and in her early forties, she explored the Carmelite spirituality. However, by her late forties, she abandoned her Christian traditions in favour of the African traditional religion of her ethnic community, and openly declared to her siblings that she was not a Christian any more. While there might several factors in play in her very complex trajectory of faith, one antecedent stood out as salient.

> We were so strongly trained for… to know what was right and what was wrong. You wanted to be in the right place at the right time, you wanted to do the right thing. But, one of my challenging experiences from the Opus Dei, was the

> Catholic confession. Because they gave you a list, and you'd sit with and tick out what you may not have done correctly? Those little questions became a bit of an issue. As a child I used to quarrel with my sister, or take stuff out of the kitchen without mum's permission. When it came to the list, it used to bother my mind, you know. I feared much that exercise. When I was in Grade 7, I asked my mum if I could discontinue the formation programme of the Opus Dei. But the guilt stayed on!

In the case of 23-year-old David, the struggle began with his religion when he was about 14. He says, in school he joined the Christian Union, which was an association of Non-Catholic students. Then one day,

> "the pastor kept... kept on pushing my head for me to fall down, ha, holy spirit, holy spirit. (Chuckles..), the way they, they always force things. Actually, what pastor was doing actually gave me so many thoughts about religion. So, I started thinking too much ... about this thing called religion. Yeah. Finally, I came to realize that eh... everything I can do through my effort.

In some cases, there was imposition of some extraordinary practices, like the Christian patron or a matron in a school insists that as a Christian one should not listen to secular music (Jane, 28). This seems too much for a young person. In other cases, certain approaches in indoctrination (Noah, 23), exaggerated guilt around sexuality (Agnes, 35) that turned them off from Christianity.

5. Awareness of Historical Narrative around Christianity in Africa

As young people grow up and read African literature, study African history in schools, and listen to stories at home of their past, they become aware that Christianity in Africa is enmeshed with slavery and colonialism. It generates a sentiment of intense anger followed by a rejection of Christianity. In precise terms, the antecedent to secularisation is the awakening of consciousness of the African identity that is triggered by the socio-historical narrative about the early years of Christianity in Africa.

Christianity and colonialist "came in together. One supported the other. So, we've gone past the colonial era, countries now are independent, but Christianity has destroyed our identity, you know?" (Edel, 50). Even prior to the fully fledged colonialism in Africa, "take for example the slave traders. They were Christians. But they chose to enslave our ancestors in a very harsh manner. They justified it with their own "beliefs". Really... That's why I come to disagree with this Christianity" (Ivo, 23). Additionally, Noel (m, 23) continues, "when slavery came into Africa, I realise that, it was Christians who exploited our assets. They took away our culture. They took away our everything. They gave us names that are not our own." Following the cruelty of slave trade, colonialism was established. During this period, "Christianity was forcefully introduced to Africa" (Eli, 28). "Christianity was used as a tool to start the subjugation of Africans and other indigenous cultures" (Mat, 24).

In summary, the critique of slave trade and westernisation becomes enmeshed with the critique of Christianity. After all, both used the same ships of colonialists to arrive in the African continent. Therefore, the rejection of the historical trauma, for some people, entails the rejection of Christianity.

3.2. Triggers

Having identified some of the antecedents of secularisation, now we focus on triggers. Triggers, as said earlier, in this context refer to the immediate factors that prompts abandoning the Christian faith. We highlight three themes under this category: social tragedy that confounds with personal trauma; ill treatment from the Church; and attitude towards sexual orientation and identity.

1. Social Tragedy in Contemporary History

In recent decades in Kenya, there have been some incidents of collective trauma associated with religion, which were mentioned rather spontaneously by participants in the interviews. To someone who is already struggling with some of the antecedents mentioned

above, social trauma associated with religion that confounds with personal trauma acts as an immediate prompter, and necessarily a cause, in their decision to abandon religion. We highlight insights from two participants.

Mat (m, 34) had been struggling with his faith from an intellectual perspective. His parents had some mixed faith background; his mum was a Church-goer while his father was not. The experience of a social tragedy that was too close to their location and that was aggravated by an incident of burglary became too much to bear:

> I would go back to 2007. That's just after the post-election violence[2]. So, for me what happened that year, we were burgled around the same time. So, they broke all our windows, stole some of our things; just harassed us. It was traumatic and scary. Then after that I started uh... asking myself why... why would a God... why would a God who claims he loves us allow this to happen.
>
> So... the thing that I think ticked me off was the Kiambaa church massacre.[3] Like... that happened and the Church (leadership) was quiet for about two or three days. And even going back to Kenya's history, the church had always been an integral part of democratic reform. So why is it that this time they are nowhere to be seen?... So that's around the time I started losing my faith.

Jane (f, 28) hailed from a family that had discordant relationship. She had been "bullied" in her evangelical school for her Catholic background. She went to a secularised university, and during those days, there occurred a cruel killing in another university, supposedly carried out by Islam-inspired terrorism. She says,

> when in 2015, Garissa University attack happened. And I feel like that was what... (sigh)... that really, really broke my heart. I remember it was around Easter. So, I just asked myself... did 148 people really have to die? And shortly before that Westgate[4] had happened. And I was like; these are children. Honestly, if this God exists, how cruel must he be? How much of a sadist must he be? And I was like; yes fine people say oh.. there is... and I even took a philosophy class that was like: good and evil can exist in the world. Ai, but it didn't quite do much for me, to be quite honest. I was just like: 148 people! Oh, let your name be praised! Non-sense!

2. Ill-treatment from the Church

As individuals struggle with the antecedents that threaten their faith life, another possible trigger that acts as the last straw on the camel's back, could be ill treatment from their Church shown to them, or to significant others in their lives. Eli's (28) brother was a church-going Christian. He had a child before he was officially married, and he still continued to go to church.

> Some of the leaders in our church, started to talk badly to him saying: 'what have you done? ... you need to get married first before you get a child. You know what the Bible says no sex before marriage.' So in fact that's what made my brother stop going to church.... it didn't sit well with me either.

Ivo (m, 23) was a peripheral member of the Seventh Day Adventists' church when his mum died. At the funeral, he gave a eulogy to his departed mum, addressing his words directly to the departed.

> And afterwards when the pastor came, that's an Adventist pastor now, He really condemned me. He said that you are not allowed to talk to the dead. That now became more personal. I was like... this pastor can't allow me to mourn my mother? I am not allowed in the way that I like to mourn. Yeah. It was like.. the church makes rules how I should mourn. That was very bad; I really felt very bad. That's when I decided to do away with being religious.

As for Agnes (f, 35), in the context of the death of her mother, she felt illtreated by her Catholic Church. Her mum was an active member of the Church, the family asked for mass to be celebrated in the church for the funeral. However, the priest refused because

she was not married in the church. In contrast to the above, then as individuals search for meaning in their own, they come across people who claim to be Christians whose life is not impressive, but there are non-believers who come out as very mature humans, so they drift off or seek meaning for their own life outside their Christian tradition (Agnes, 35).

3. Attitude of Religion towards Sexual Orientation and/or Identity

During our interviews, the topic of sexual orientation and identity came up rather spontaneously, in relation to how religions respond to this reality. David, who identifies as a bisexual, wonders:

> "How can I say it? Let me just... We are homophobic. And again, we say God created everything in his own image and likeness. And why do we do that now [hating people] who are in the image of God, just because of the different sexual orientation? Is it right? And yet we go... everybody is God's creation. It doesn't add up at all.

For Jane, who did not acknowledge her sexual orientation, it was the attitude of religious people towards fellow human beings who might have different orientation, among other factors that put her off from religion.

> Another thing that contributed to it was... I don't know if it is the church's stand or the Bible's stand. But their views on home sexuality and LGBTQ community. I was like: Ok, because one man chooses to love another man or people of the same sex choose to love another person. And then, I believe God .... I am being an empathetic and I say, homosexuals go to hell? Like it felt quite... (sighs), this is not right.

3.3. Response

Our third category of theme(s) are grouped under the domain of response. While the antecedents work in the background, and the individuals are confounded with certain triggers, they begin to develop a response to religion, and to Christianity in particular. These responses including just drifting away from Christianity slowly, rather unconsciously and without a conscious choice, or being rebellious and expressing oneself rather vehemently that religious belief is all nonsense, and the best solution is atheism or agnosticism, or seeking-freedom–fleeing from the negative aspects of religious and embracing those that do not threaten the wellbeing of the person; some seek meaning with a lot of sincerity and openness. Others integrate some ideologies within a coherent system and maintain a value system based on humanistic reasoning.

1. Questioning and Meaning Seeking

The response of questioning and meaning seeking occurs particularly among those who are a bit sophisticated in their thinking. The response of questioning and meaning seeking also demonstrates their sincerity and authenticity. Edel, who was our key informant, who abandoned Christian faith in favour of the African traditional religion, says that one Easter, she started questioning herself:

> So, when I come here now, because I know what my Christian teaching entails and requires. I don't want to leave, I don't want to walk on (laughs)... on egg shells. I want to be genuine, alright. So let me take one approach wholly, now, since I have lived [Christian path] completely and I know there was a gap inside me. So I adopted the African way.

Ivo (m, 23) had lost his mum when he was still in college. He eulogised during the funeral addressing his words to his dead mum. Additionally, he was reprimanded by the pastor that the SDAs do not talk to the dead. Then, his meaning-seeking began as a very gradual process which he had started as early as when he was 11,

> And most of the time I could think on the topics of very wide or curious topics like what's the meaning of life? What's our origin? What happens after we die? And those questions I could not find the answers in the Christian belief. ... the answers were very insufficient from the Christian based life. That's why I chose

> to think in a free-thinking way. That perhaps what the [Christian] belief is saying may not be true. Perhaps there are other answers that are more profound to this life questions."

For those who are really sincere in their search for meaning, the process can be agonising. We found Mat (m, 34) very articulate as he was very deep in his replies. So, the interviewer said, "*You seem to have sorted a lot of stuff in your mind*. . . " However, he responded in a very serious tone:

> I have been thinking about these things for a long time. So, since 2008. . . One of the things people get wrong about losing your faith or coming to a point where you no longer go to church is: they always imagine it was an easy choice. But for me I agonised about it for so many years. Remember, I grew up in the Church, for around 23 years. . . and now I'm confronting the idea that maybe everything I was told might not be true. So, deconditioning myself from all those 20 years wasn't easy.

2. Maintaining Meaning in eclectic or synthetic approach

Having succumbed to the antecedents, and having responded to the triggers in one's faith life, and having made a choice, consciously or unconsciously, how do individuals maintain themselves in their new non-religious position, in terms of meaning, connectedness and value system? We identify two major themes under this section: maintaining meaning by being eclectic, and maintaining value through humanism. 'Being eclectic' in one's beliefs and ideologies consists of picking and choosing from a variety of sources and putting them together, while 'being syncretic' could imply a process of synthesis of the different approaches. A few people take time to synthesis, but most just put things together.

If one does not believe in God, then it follows logically that they do not believe in a soul or in life-after death. Steve (m, 34) is consistent with his belief system, to him death is like a computer that stops functioning. That is it! Similarly, Eli (m, 28) says,

> I don't believe in life after death. I just ask someone where were you before you were born? Which state were you in? I believe when you die you return to that state.

On the other hand, some would like to be secular yet believe in immortality. For example, Ivo (m, 23) brands himself as a free thinker, and not as an atheist, therefore he can afford to be eclectic about his belief in after-life. He ruminates that not to believe in after-life is as "if we delete the reality. I don't think its practical for you to be mortal then. . . That's really absurd to me." Similarly, Jane (f, 28) alludes believing in some form of re-incarnation!

When such ideologies get synthesised, individuals tend to move towards being spiritual-but-not-religious. Mary (f, 34) classified herself as a "Christian who is not religious but is spiritual." What is spirituality to her?

> spirituality to me means connecting with a higher being um, whichever way I see fit. So, if that means mediation to me, that's how I connect, that is fine. I don't have to go to physical building or church or belong to any organization to be able to connect to my, a higher being if I may call it that.

3. Maintaining a Value System with Humanist Principles

How do people who have lapsed out of their faith build their value system? One surprising finding of the study was that almost all participants expressed a coherent and consistent value system. They argued that one can be moral based on human values. "For me now I believe in humanity. Humanity is what drives me... Is this thing humanly good?" (Eli, 28). Therefore, without belonging to a religion, you can "*still be a pretty decent person and do good to people and be kind, . . . without the shame and guilt that comes with a sort of rigid structured religion. It is not about performing your religion anymore*" (Jane, 28).

Some participants argued that being good is intrinsic to human beings. After all, being good or bad is like black and black, there are universal truth. Of course, there are some grey area that need mutual agreement (Agnes, 35). To Ivo (m, 23)

> knowing "what's good or bad, is more innate or is more inherent" to human beings. "We are born with it. I don't have to subscribe to any institution or belief to know that killing is bad... I have come to the conclusion that the more peaceful people are the irreligious."

Most participants hinted at the Golden rule, without naming it as such, as the underlying principle of universal morality apart from religion: do to no one what you would not want done to you, or do to others what you want them to do to you. As Ben (m, 31) put it plainly, "*I'm doing good things to people because I would want those things to be reciprocated to me.*" To Steve (m, 34), morality is basically an agreement not to hurt each other.

> So, if... for example, when I commit adultery I will hurt my wife. If my wife commits adultery, she will hurt me. So ... I will not want to do something to hurt my wife. So that is why I say adultery no. But it's not coming from the Bible, but is coming from our own standard. What we try not to hurt others or to hurt ourselves.

So then, what motivates someone like David (m, 23) to be nice to someone? David says, "If you want to do good, just do good. Don't expect anything. There is no reward for being good." "In fact, if I expect a reward, that will make my actions not so genuine. So, I guess that is how I am" (Alex, 27). "It's this question that is always asked: if we keep doing something, where do we end up? So, if we keep being kind, if we keep being compassionate, if we keep being generous, the world would be a better place" (Mat, 34).

4. Discussion

The present study set out to explore the antecedents, triggers, and responses in the process of secularisation and adoption of spirituality among lapsed-Christian young adults in Nairobi city. Eleven themes have been highlighted as salient in the data collected from 14 participants. The first two themes pertain to the family background of the lapsed-Christian young adults. Besides the mixed faith background of the parents, discordant relationship between them seems to be an important antecedent. A persuasive study carried out by Christopher Ellison and his colleagues in the U.S, involving a large sample of 1500 young adults similar to the present study (aged from 18 to 35), confirmed that persons raised by parents in intact, happy, low-conflict marriages tend to score higher on most religious and spiritual outcomes such as frequency of attendance in religious prayer, interest in religion as a source of truth and meaning, and report positive experiences of God. On the other hand, young adults who grow up in divorced families and those from intact high-conflict families score relatively low on most religious and spiritual outcomes (Ellison et al. 2011). The findings of the present study drawn from an urban African young adult population corroborate the findings of Ellison. Similarly, Granqvist and Kirkpartrick and their colleagues (Granqvist et al. 2010; Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2013) have explored the dynamics between childhood attachment with the caregiver and children's image of God as young adults. The present study did not focus on this research area. Future studies that are quantitative in approach, focusing on these themes might help in establishing more significantly the association between family situations and young adults' abandoning their Christian faith in urban Africa.

The theme of "lack of faith formation" as a contributing factor to increasing secularism seems very understandable. Counterintuitively though, a survey carried out among non-believing university students in Poland showed that all surveyed atheists (100%) were basptised and had gone through faith formation in preparation for the reception of sacraments (Kopiczko 2015). Therefore, the author suggests that it is not necessarily the absence of faith formation that may contribute to atheism, but the methodology in carrying out the formation. As has also emerged in the data analysis, most participants in the present study acknowledged that they were aware of formation programmes in their church, and some did participate in them. Still, they were overcome by secularisation. This situation needs further investigation.

The fourth theme suggests that secularisation could arise as a reactionary ideology to the exaggerations of religions. The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church conceded that,

> Undeniably, those who wilfully shut out God from their hearts and try to dodge religious questions are not following the dictates of their consciences, and hence are not free of blame; yet believers themselves frequently bear some responsibility for this situation. For, taken as a whole, atheism is not a spontaneous development but stems from a variety of causes, including a critical reaction against religious beliefs, and in some places against the Christian religion in particular. Hence believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism (Vatican II 1965, no.19c).

Related to the above, the seventh and eighth themes, which act as triggers rather than some remote antecedents to secularisation, point out that certain methodologies and strategies of contemporary Christianity could also play its part in secularisation. Critiquing televangelism, for instance, Bruce (1990) and others have argued for its role in secularisation, due to their theological blandness, and trivialisation of miracles. Similar trend has been recognised in the African Pentecostal churches. Togarasei (2015) observes that some Pentecostal churches are too focused on health, wealth, and pleasure by the use of music and dance during worship, accompanied by the neglect of a deep theology of Parousia. This could contribute to secularisation as the seventh theme suggests.

More specifically, the eighth theme picked up the experience of one participant who was a bisexual, who felt rejected by the Church. Several studies have pointed out a strong correlation between high level of religiosity and rejection of people with different sexual orientation (for instance, see, Altemeyer 2003). Similarly, Linneman and Clendenen (2009) point out that level of atheism is high among homosexuals. The dynamics between the two variables of sexual orientation and secularisation needs further exploration among African young adults.

Related to theme 10 of the present study, in the UK and in continental Europe, in the last two decades or so, there has been a plethora of discussion around believing and belonging (Aarts et al. 2008; Davie 1990; Day 2009). There could be people who believe in supernatural realities without belonging to a religion (Davie 1990), conversely there could be others who believe merely because they want to belong to a group that gives them identity (Day 2009). This seems to be a reality even in Africa as demonstrated by the data emerging in the present study.

Hans Küng (1998) and Armstrong (2016) have advocated for global ethics based on the Golden Rule (see also Lynch et al. 2001). In the findings of the present study, the global ethics has been spontaneously highlighted. As brought out in the 11th theme, many of the participants have offered their personalised version of the Golden Rule. A typical expression was, "I'm doing good things to people because I would want those things to be reciprocated to me" (Ben, 31). Additionally, many participants have claimed that it is something intrinsic to human being. It would take more nuanced research to establish whether this is a product of socialisation or is indeed intrinsic to human beings. In any case, the data has suggested, at least in a limited way, that it is possible to build a viable ethical system apart from religions. Therefore, the suggestion of Shorter and Onyancha (1997) that increasing secularisation in Nairobi is accompanied by a lack of values might not hold good. Future studies around the theme of secularisation in urban Africa could explore in more depth the sub-theme of moral reasoning apart from religion. Besides, there was some indication, emerging in the present study, of certain patterns in the trajectory unpinning young adults falling out of their Christian faith. A larger dataset will be needed to establish a clear typology of pathways to secularisation among African young adults.

One of the obvious limitations of the present study, as it is the case with most qualitative studies, is its lack of generalisability. With the qualitative data drawn from in-depth interviews in the present study, we could only explore the experience and perception of the participants regarding their journey towards secularisation. In any case, the contribution

from this study is likely to promote increased discussion and greater awareness among Christian leaders in the African continent not to take for granted that the people of Africa are "notoriously religious". The social landscape is fast changing, and different traditions of Christianity in urban Africa have to reinvent themselves lest they run of the risk of being rejected by the younger generation.

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Notes

1 All names are pseudonyms. Consistently of the pseudonym is maintained while referring to the same individual. Gender and age are included within brackets.

2 The elections in Kenya in December 2007 were marred by violent ethnic conflicts, in which an estimated 1500 people were killed and another 500,000 were displaced.

3 About 50 people were burnt alive inside a church in Western Kenya on 1 January 2008, during the ethnic violence that followed the controversial election of 2007.

4 Another terrorist attack on a shopping mall that took place months earlier, perpetrated by militants of the same group.

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