

Contextualization in the Post- secular American Society

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DOI: 10.7252/Paper.000066

ABSTRACT

As the USA becomes a nation of immigrants, post-secularism goes with the painful process of transformation into post-colonialism which is often hidden in relation to the political, social, and cultural effects of decolonization. Here crucial questions arise about how American Christianity contextualizes its post-secular society with religious pluralism and post-colonial trauma, and how it reconciles with Non-Westerners and becomes missional partners in post-secular American society and for world evangelization. For contextualizing America in a post-secular age, a biblical and contextual understanding of diaspora is required; it calls for America's awareness to be partners with the diasporic south for the renewal of the church and world mission. Their repentance to heal post-colonial trauma, moving toward reconciliation and partnership for the world mission, is required.

INTRODUCTION

As the 2013 Pew Research shows, in 2050 82% of the population increase in the USA will be due to immigrants and their descendants. For example, the USA is the world's number one destination for Christian migrants, who make up nearly three-quarters (74%) of all foreign-born people. It is also the top destination for Buddhist immigrants, and the world's second-leading destination for Hindu immigrants, after India, and for Jewish immigrants, after Israel. Seeing its demographic trends, mission scholars have begun to redefine the USA as a mission field.

At the same time, it should be noted that American society has moved toward post-secularism, which, for J. Habermas (2008), refers to the resurgence of religions and pluralism. In particular, post-secularism goes along with the painful process of transformation to post colonialism, which is often hidden in relation to the political, social, and cultural effects of decolonization, including the anti-colonial challenge to western dominance, and the effects of postcolonial globalization and the development of indigenous solutions to local needs.

Here crucial questions arise about how American Christianity contextualizes its post-secular society with religious pluralism and post-colonial trauma, and how it reconciles with Non-Westerners and becomes missional partners in post-secular American society and for world evangelization. In order to answer these questions, first, I will focus on the history of secularism theory and its debate to understand current American contexts; secondly, I will describe the religious landscape of post-secularism in the USA; thirdly, I will suggest ways to contextualize post-secular American society for the revival of the local church as well as world mission.

1. Secularism, the Secularization Thesis, and Desecularization

In 1851, the term “secularism” was first used by the British scholar George Jacob Holyoake; its meaning refers to promoting a social order separate from religion, that is, the principle of the separation of government institutions and persons from religious persons and institutions. In 1967, Peter Berger, a fearless proponent of the “secularization theory,” wrote *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of A Sociological Theory of Religion*. This theory held that as technology improved and modernity advanced in a culture, religion would begin to decline.

By the late 1980s, however, Berger publicly recognized that religion was not only still prevalent, but in many cases was more vibrantly practiced than in periods in the past, particularly in the United States; in 1999, Berger edited his view of the “deseccularization of the world” by claiming the world is not secularized anymore. As we have all experienced, however, secularism is still prevalent even in a time of deseccularization. From a biblical perspective, contemporary Christianity has become more and more secularized as it aims to adapt easily to the current world for its survival.

2. The Religious Landscape of Post-secularism in the USA

1) *Post-secular: a complementary learning process between religions and secularities*

For Habermas, the term “post-secular” can be applied to secularized societies in which “religion maintains a public influence and relevance, while the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernization is losing ground”(Michele Dillon 2012). Habermas’ conclusion is that “Both religious and secular mentalities must be open to a complementary learning process if we are to balance shared citizenship and cultural difference.”

2) *Immigrant pluralistic society for democratic citizenship*

The return of religions in the USA has included a pluralism of immigrants from multi-religious backgrounds around the world. Here is an example from the Pluralism Project at Harvard University: over the past five decades, immigration has dramatically changed the religious landscape of the United States. Today, the encounter of people of different religious traditions takes place in our own cities and neighborhoods. In 1991, the Pluralism Project at Harvard University (www.pluralism.org) began a pioneering study of America’s changing religious landscape. Through an expanding network of affiliates, they “document the contours of our multi-religious society, explore new forms of interfaith engagement, study the impact of religious diversity in civic life, and contextualize these findings within a global framework.”

This statement shows in what direction society has been changing. This project statement continues, “The religious landscape of America is changing as immigrants from all over the world take the oath of citizenship and claim the

United States as their home... the new post-1965 immigration has made clear for all Americans that the United States is a nation based not on race, ethnicity, or religion, but on common commitment to the democratic ideals of its constitution. “

3) The mourning of post-colonialism inherent in post-secularism

For Habermas, post-secular does not refer to just the resurgence of religions, but goes with the painful process of transformation into post-colonialism. What is the post-colonialism? In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), the psychiatrist Frantz Fanon medically analyzed the nature of colonialism as the imposition of a subjugating identity which is harmful to the mental health of the native peoples who were subjugated into colonies, and that the ideological essence of colonialism is the systematic denial of “all attributes of humanity” of the colonized people, which is called dehumanization.

In the same way, with post-colonial studies based on trauma, J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, Toni Morrison, and Sam Durrant wrote *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*. In his review of it, Kimberly W. Segall analyzed that this work is “part of a recent trend to *redefine* the postcolonial in relation to trauma studies, which emphasizes how atrocity cannot be represented.” These trauma studies of postcolonialism, emerging out of Holocaust studies, show what a severe suffering and mourning in their hearts and memories immigrants from non-Western nations, mainly, the Third World, who have their roots in colonized history, have to face.

3. How to Contextualize American Post-Secular Society

In its original sense, contextualization is the process of assigning *meaning* as a means of *interpreting* the environment within which a text is executed (Wheeler 2002:78). What are some of the principles we use to assign meanings as a way of interpreting the post-secular American society within which we hope to communicate the Gospel?

1) Biblically understanding God's calling of immigrant Christians in the USA

First of all, the major trend of the current post-secular society is oriented to immigrant diaspora, which should be contextualized to integrate with the rest of American Christianity. According to the 2010 U.S. census, 43 million residents

were foreign born, and of those, about 74 percent were Christian. “Jehu Hanciles, a scholar of Christianity and globalization, said African Christian churches in America are places where members find their calling when it comes to advocacy.” In the same way, we must confess that multiethnic immigrants groups and Christians come to America in response to God’s calling.

According to their position on diaspora missiology by the Lausanne Conference, immigration is part of God’s providence for His mission. The host nation should welcome diaspora strangers as its own families and coworkers. As Acts 2 shows, on the birthday of the church diaspora was called by God and served as the secret impetus of God’s world mission.

2) Forming hermeneutical multiethnic communities: joint congregations or local associations

In most cases, immigrants have formed their own congregations due to cultural differences, especially, language barriers. However, we must make more attempts to form one congregation out of multi-ethnic groups because the church in the Bible is one multi-ethnic body. 1 Cor 12:13 says, “we were all baptized by one spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free...” This does not mean that all churches form one local congregation, but that local churches should make an effort to form multi-ethnic congregations to fulfill the calling to be one body.

As one example of easily becoming one body, American churches with a building often merge with immigrant churches without a building, or American churches and immigrant churches form a local partnership or association, sharing their faith, fellowship, and mission; challenging and empowering each other.

3) Reconciliation and healing practiced by repentance: healing post-colonial hurts and hatred

What is the core message Jesus proclaimed when he came to this world? “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near”(Matt 4:17). Here we as Christians find the good news that repentance brings the Kingdom of God; so it is a gift from God. Western and non-Western people should repent of their past respectively, including the postcolonial tragedy which is inherent in post-secular American

society. As the story of Joseph and his eleven brothers in Genesis 45-50 shows, their repentance and forgiveness caused the building of the nation of Israel into 12 tribes, a model of the kingdom of God.

In the same way, all Christians should repent of their sins of exploiting their brothers and sisters as well as not forgiving them in the name of Jesus. This repentance will help heal post-colonial hurts and hatred; without this repentance, there will be no Kingdom of God in our hearts, or our societies. No repentance, no Kingdom.

4) A missional living through living the Beatitudes as the Great Constitution of the Kingdom of God

Jesus Christ suggested the Beatitudes as the Great Constitution of the Kingdom of God; they represent the way of life for Jesus' disciples as well as all citizens of the Kingdom of God. Living the Beatitudes paves the way for Christians becoming the salt of the world and the light of the world (Matt 5:13-14). Jesus says, "they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven"(Matt 5:16).

According to Lesslie Newbigin (1989:230), "The Church is sent into the world to continue that which he came to do, in the power of the same Spirit, reconciling people to God." Jesus said, "As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). Thus every Christian in this world is one of God's people sent for His mission. What then is the essential strategy for this post-secular society that rejects the absoluteness of Christianity and its public evangelism, and emphasizes democratic citizenship alone?

It is the life of heavenly citizenship, based on living the Beatitudes, that is a shining light for the world even without the use of words. This can be called missional living in a post-secular society. "In Him was life, and that life was the light of men," (John 1:4). Nobody hinders a shining light; neither does any law in the world.

Furthermore, Charles Taylor (2007) explored what does it mean to say that we live in a secular age? His conclusion is represented in two ideas: spiritual conversions or "*epiphanic*" experiences (767) and celebrating the "integrity of different ways of life" moving away from homogenization as a principle.

The Christian identification of diaspora as a pilgrim who moves toward heaven, “a better country” (Hebrew 11:16), is a good example of missional life in a secular society. The Christian consciousness as being aliens and strangers serves as an antidote to a world full of greed. In relation to this, Abraham the father of our faith confessed, “I am an alien and a stranger” (Gen.23:4). However, this did not mean he was indifferent to the world, as we can see from his neighbors’ testimony, “you are a mighty prince among us” (Gen. 23:16).

5) Diaspora mission of the local church for its renewal and world mission

The major principle of biblical mission is diaspora. Its evidence appears in various places in Acts, and of those, Acts 6 offers one of the best examples. From their names, the seven evangelists selected were people of diaspora from the Hellenistic world. Originally, the church selected them for ministering in the daily distribution of food (6:1). However, God used them for his plan of world evangelization. Philip, one of the seven, was used as an agent for Samaritan mission (ch. 8); Stephan, for gentile mission (ch.11). The Antioch church as a center of world mission in Acts 13 is a diaspora model of missions.

Why did immigrants gather in America in today’s post-secular society and this global era? In *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, Philip Jenkins (2008) argued, the faith of the Global South is first and foremost a Biblical faith. Many southern Christians identify with the world portrayed in the New Testament where belief in spirits and witchcraft are commonplace Christians are persecuted just as the early Christians were. According to Jenkins, the Bible speaks to these Christians with a vividness and authenticity unavailable to most believers in the industrialized North.

This provides one possible reason why West and South meet. The encounter of the West and the Global South is God’s providence for his redemptive plans. Thus Western Christians recognize Southern Christians as coworkers sent by God for his Kingdom and likewise, the Southern Christians obey God’s will that they be partners with the West for this time of harvest. All Christians, the West as well as the South, should think deeply about why multiethnic groups have come to America at this particular time. Is it accidental? Jesus said, “I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields”(John 4:35). America in a post-secular age should be looked at as “the fields” in which the crop for eternal life is to be harvested.

CONCLUSION

The USA has become a nation of immigrant diasporas united in a post-secular society with pluralistic religions. What is a core principle of contextualization in this post-secular American society? The answer is a biblical and contextual understanding of diaspora. America is called to partner with the Global South for the renewal of the church and world mission in this modern world. Their repentance will heal post-colonial trauma, bring a missional life to the Beatitudes, and shine a Christian apologetic response on post-secularism, moving toward a renewal of world mission.

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