



What Secularism Means to Africa:

What it has been, what it hasn't been and what it could mean for human rights





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Why This Meeting Matters

For many people in this world, faith matters. When people come together around faith, it creates spaces in which there is a great power to do better and even good.

Sadly, we also see so many examples globally where faith leaders and followers have abused their power and influence. For example, some religious leaders' obsession with the pelvic zone and with always wanting to be right and dominant leads them to interfere unjustly in politics and to declare a particular denomination or belief or prejudice more powerful or worthy. This far too often has been the story of religion in public life. Just as religion has earned for itself a bad reputation, the indolence of non-theists has reached a new fever pitch and a shrill tone. Chasing women around beaches in France feels less like defending freedom and more like exercising a right to be extremely silly.

At Catholics for Choice, we work on exploring the proper role of religion in public life. We advocate for a more tolerant and just society where freedom of conscience is upheld. And we have asked the question repeatedly—can faith and freedom or faith and atheism coexist in an equal and respectful society? We do coalition work in the United States on these questions because they matter. And we have organized discussion forums and meetings at the European Parliament because we know that only by shining a light on these questions can each of us begin to uncover some truths, as uncomfortable as they may be.

African colleagues seeing our work internationally asked if we would help facilitate an African forum so they could discuss with fellow Africans these very questions. Challenged by some who felt they were missing out on a conversation critical to Africa and others who predicted that any meeting would be a complete and utter failure, Catholics for Choice—ever ready to innovate and not be afraid—went ahead. On these pages, you can evaluate for yourself the conversations we had.

When we talked with African friends, we saw that they wanted to bring together a very diverse group of scholars, professionals and activists



with ties to various African states to discuss the idea of secularism in Africa. The conversation included a discussion of whether secularism is antithetical to “African values,” that is, whether Africa historically or traditionally opposed the separation of church and state and should now reject secularism as a colonial Western imposition. This discussion illuminated that secularism is not a colonial value, instead having been part of at least several traditional African communities. The dialogue moved on to creating a working definition of secularism. From there, the value of secularism was discussed from perspectives of law, women’s rights, healthcare and more. Finally, the meeting reflected on ways towards a secular African future, including a declaration by those who were there on what they believe.

We hope you will agree that—call it secularism or something else—thinking about tolerance is certainly something that is relevant to creating more just, equal and compassionate places for us to live in harmony and respect for one another. Let us know what you think.

Sincerely,

Jon O'Brien
President
Catholics for Choice



Final Declaration

We believe in a secular society that:


- Actively defends and supports the separation of religion and state;
- Champions human and civil rights on behalf of all of its citizens, without exception;
- Recognizes and protects the inherent values and rights of each of its citizens;
- Defends and upholds freedom of speech;
- Respects religious, atheist and humanist groups and in which all are able to express their views equally;
- Does not oppress or give preferential treatment in any way to any group; and
- Does not favor one religion over another or force anyone to adhere to any particular religious belief.

We are committed to advancing a secular society:

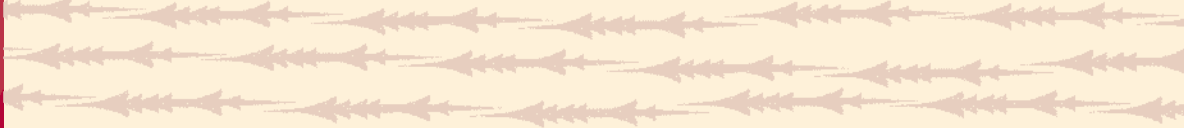
- That advances principles of human rights, human dignity, nondiscrimination and rule of law;
- Where individuals experience freedom of religion and freedom from religion; and
- Where no one is compelled to adopt a religious belief for any reason.

We believe that secularism can benefit African societies by:

- Contributing towards nation building and social cohesion;
- Creating space for dissent and freedom of conscience;
- Making a distinction between political and religious powers and roles;
- Creating transparency around relationships between religion and government;
- Creating spaces for open discussion between people of all faiths and no faith;
- Fostering a community that lives at peace and rejects religious or nonreligious extremism; and
- Supporting the rights and autonomy of individuals.



Participant Biographies



Participant Biographies

Conference chair



Ambassador Dr. Eunice Brookman-Amissah is a physician and obstetrician-gynecologist, former Minister of Health of Ghana (1996–1998)

and Ambassador to the Kingdom of the Netherlands (1998–2001). During her tenure as Ghana's Minister of Health, she introduced comprehensive reproductive health services that highlighted the needs of underprivileged populations. Dr. Brookman-Amissah has served as Vice President for Africa at Ipas since 2001, during which time she established and headed the Africa Alliance for Women's Reproductive Health and Rights, based in Nairobi. Her work with African institutions includes projects with the African Union, national governments, the Women's Movement and various health and legal professional associations and media outlets. She continues to unite and mobilize diverse groups to advocate for policy change to reduce maternal deaths and disabilities from unsafe abortion. Dr. Brookman-Amissah currently serves as Special Advisor to the Ipas President for African Affairs.

Conference facilitator



Ms. Tamara Braam is an organizational development consultant based in Johannesburg, South Africa. She runs a strategic management

consultancy with a wide range of clients, including donors as well as government and civil society organizations at the national, regional and international levels. The consultancy aims to support individuals, organizations and institutions in optimizing their effectiveness by amplifying their strategic and operational strengths and synergies, while continuously exploring innovative and collective ways to harness capacity and energy, address challenges, build interconnections and break new ground. Ms. Braam has a long history of supporting strategy development for change with activists and policymakers, and in building connections between the two groups across a range of African countries. Sexual and reproductive health and rights, including the right to access a safe abortion in the Africa region, have been key priorities. Supporting civil society and government actors to shift attitudes, separate their personal beliefs from the rights of others and engage with the community in ways that enhance the advancement of the rights of others continue to be a significant focus of her work.

Conference host



Mr. Jon O'Brien is President of Catholics for Choice (CFC), the leading prochoice organization advocating for sexual and reproductive rights from

a standpoint of culture, faith, justice and morality. A leader in developing global strategies for reproductive health and rights, Mr. O'Brien has strengthened communications and advocacy efficacy as well as policy development on five continents, working with family planning associations, doctors and nurses, prochoice advocates, nonprofit leaders and policymakers to develop new ways to discuss and advance respect for women's choices. Before joining CFC in 1996, he worked on the front lines of reproductive health provision at the Irish Family Planning Association and as Program Manager at the International Planned Parenthood Federation's European Bureau in London, where he oversaw the establishment of family planning clinics in Eastern Europe during a time of immense political and social turmoil. A lifelong Catholic born and raised in the Republic of Ireland, Mr. O'Brien's initial involvement in reproductive rights was sparked by his reaction to the great injustices that women face as a result of the Catholic hierarchy's influence over public policy in the country.

Conference faculty



Mr. Leo Igwe is a former Catholic seminarian and current freelance journalist and human rights activist. He has previously served as both

the West and South African representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union and has published articles on ways in which religious extremists have co-opted local government to enforce religious codes of law and hamper the preservation of human rights. In 1996, he founded the Nigerian Humanist Movement to promote humanism, defend secularism and provide a sense of community to all nonreligious Nigerians. He has specialized in campaigning against and documenting the impacts of child witchcraft accusations. In 2014, he was chosen as a laureate for the International Academy of Humanism, which recognizes distinguished humanists furthering respect for human rights, freedom and the dignity of the individual. He holds an MA in philosophy from the University of Calabar in Nigeria and is working on a PhD project at the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies in Germany.



Dr. Fatou Sow is a Senegalese sociologist. After undergraduate studies at the University of Dakar, she received a PhD in Sociology from the

University of Paris-Sorbonne. She also holds a Research Director Habilitation in Sociology from the Paris Diderot University (Paris VII), where she was a researcher at the Center for Developing Societies: Interdisciplinary Studies (SEDET) and a member of the Centre for Education, Documentation and Research for Feminist Studies (CEDREF). Dr. Sow was previously an associate researcher at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN) at the University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar, Senegal. While Dr. Sow has researched and written on social issues in development, her academic career shifted when she focused on a feminist critique of African societies and cultures: women and gender issues, gender-based violence, women's rights and citizenship. Her current work centers on two key issues: reproductive health and sexual rights in Senegal and Africa, and the overlap between culture, religion, politics and fundamentalism in Africa. She is the current Director of Women Living Under Muslim Laws, the international solidarity network based in London.



Mr. Kunle Olulode is Director of Voice 4 Change England, a national policy organization championing the black

and minority ethnic voices in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors, with the objective of engaging policymakers to drive more informed and responsive policymaking. Mr. Olulode has a wealth of experience gained from running policy teams in the voluntary sector and local government and as a former Convener of Camden Black Workers Group. An active campaigner within the trade union movement, he has a strong record of building partnerships with leading national and international organizations, having also worked abroad in Spain and in the US for groups such as the Catalan Institute in Barcelona, the Tommie Smith Youth Movement and 100 Black Men of Southern California. He has a keen interest in the arts, particularly black history and film, and was a founding member of the award-winning Camden Black History Forum Email. Mr. Olulode holds a Bachelor of Business Economics and Political History from University College London.

Participant Biographies

Conference participants



Ms. Pamela Adie works as Senior Campaigns Manager with All Out, a global lesbian, gay, bi and trans (LGBT) rights advocacy organization.

She is also a writer whose works have been featured in other anthology series. She is passionate about expanding the rights of LGBT people in the world. She serves on the Application Review Board of the LGBT Community Fund with the Initiative for Equal Rights organization in Nigeria and is also a serving Board Member of the Bisi Alimi Foundation. An MBA graduate from Webster University, Ms. Adie also holds a Master's Degree in Human Services Management from the University of Baltimore and a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration from the University of Wisconsin–Superior. An avid supporter of Manchester United, Ms. Adie's interests and hobbies include watching football, writing, photography, traveling and dancing. She lives and works in Lagos, Nigeria.



Mr. Bisi Alimi is an internationally renowned researcher, public speaker, policy analyst, television pundit, campaigner and

community builder with expertise in sexual health, social justice and human rights and LGBT rights. He is Executive Director of the Bisi Alimi Foundation, which conducts research, campaigns, advocacy, trainings and engagement in Nigeria to combat homophobia and promote equality. Based in London, he cofounded Rainbow Intersection, a dialogue on race, culture and sexuality in Britain. Mr. Alimi also consults for the World Bank, contributes

articles to outlets like the Guardian and Project Syndicate, and has appeared on Tell Me More with NPR's Michel Martin, Amanpour with CNN's Christiane Amanpour and BBC World Service.



Dr. Yoswa Mbulalina Dambisya, MB ChB; PhD, is the Director General of ECSA-HC, the East, Central and Southern African Health Community, since

August 2014. Prior to joining ECSA-HC, Dr. Dambisya worked for the University of Limpopo in South Africa. As Director General, he is charged with providing overall leadership and guidance to technical and corporate programs towards the realization of the ECSA-HC mandate. Dr. Dambisya is a medical graduate with an MBChB degree from Makerere University, Kampala, and a PhD in Pharmacology from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has undertaken several short courses in various fields, including leadership and management, monitoring and evaluation, medical education, global health diplomacy and strategic planning.



Ms. Dawne Deppe is an international development specialist with 22 years of experience in the US and abroad, including over 15 years working in East, West

and Southern Africa. Her specialties include youth development; gender in development; local government capacity-building; leadership development; basic, vocational and higher education; agriculture and food security and child labor reduction and prevention. She has worked extensively

in Botswana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan and Tanzania. Ms. Deppe holds a BA in Religion from the University of Iowa, and an MA in Women's Studies from the George Washington University. Ms. Deppe is a current member of the Catholics for Choice Board of Directors.



Mr. Sahlu Haile is currently a Senior Scholar at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, previously serving as their Regional Advisor for

Africa and Ethiopia Country Representative responsible for strategy development in family planning, reproductive health, youth development, girls' education and women empowerment. He has been active in reproductive health throughout Africa for the last 30 years, working for Family Planning International Assistance, the Association for Voluntary Surgical Contraception (now known as EngenderHealth), John Snow Incorporated and UNFPA.



Dr. Aflodis Kagaba is a physician and human rights advocate with over 10 years of experience in the planning and management of health

programs. Dr. Kagaba has extensive knowledge of public health, health policy and advocacy, nutrition, infectious diseases, sexual and reproductive health and rights and hygiene and sanitation. He currently serves as the Executive Director of Health Development Initiative-Rwanda (HDI), an organization he cofounded to promote health and development among

disadvantaged communities. In addition to his work with HDI, Dr. Kagaba serves as the Chairperson of Rwandan NGO Network for Water, Sanitation and Environment. He is a Board Advisor to the Rwandan Youth Association for Human Rights Promotion and Development (AJPRODHO) and a member of the Steering Committee for the East African Health Platform. He holds an MD degree from the School of Medicine, National University of Rwanda, and an MS in International Health Policy and Management from Heller School, Brandeis University.



Dr. Joseph Gatheru Karanja is currently an Associate Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Nairobi, his alma mater, where he

completed his MBChB and his MMed in Obstetrics and Gynecology. For over 30 years, Dr. Karanja has dedicated his professional career to the study and practice of and education on reproductive health consulting in hospitals throughout Nairobi, Kenya. He has taught in a variety of university and training settings, including for the University of Nairobi. He has also served as Chairman of Reproductive Health Services and as Council Member of the Kenya Obstetrical and Gynecological Society. In addition to his health work, Dr. Karanja has published, and been quoted in, a number of articles as an authority on unsafe abortions in Kenya.



Dr. Nehemiah Kimathi is a medical doctor and maternal and child health specialist with over three decades of experience in health systems and

programs management. He worked for the public sector as a district and provincial medical officer, rising to the level of Deputy Director of Medical Services in charge of the National Division of Reproductive Health. He served as the Deputy Team Leader for a GTZ reproductive health project in Kenya for three years before joining the WHO as a National Program Officer for a further three years. Dr. Nehemiah worked with the IPPF Africa Region Office as the Technical Advisor for Safe Motherhood and as the abortion focal person for 10 years, as well as for two years as the Senior Regional Advisor – Advocacy and Policy. He is an accomplished SRHR trainer with a focus on comprehensive abortion care, abortion values clarification and abortion laws and policies, with experience gained from sub-Saharan countries and Kenya. He currently serves as a member of the technical working group for two professional bodies and three CSOs. He is a staunch advocate for women’s right to access safe, legal abortion.



Ms. Liza Muringo Kimbo, MBA, MSc, leads the Ipas Africa Alliance in Nairobi, Kenya. She has 22 years of experience in senior and executive level

management and is a seasoned entrepreneur, having started and grown three healthcare businesses, including a pharmaceutical retail, distribution and contract management firm based in Nairobi. Ms. Kimbo also led the start-up of

CFW franchise clinics, growing the network to over 63 clinics and drug shops across the country. As Regional Director of a large US-based nonprofit organization, she was responsible for oversight of various health, education and social change programs across nine countries in the East Africa region. Following that, she established a for-profit, mid-level clinic chain with eight outlets serving low-income Kenyans. Ms. Kimbo has a BS in Finance from the University of Connecticut, an MBA from the United States International University, Nairobi, and an MSc in Health Systems Management from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London.



Mr. Michael Mekbib is the founder and Managing Director of Global Reach LLC, a firm specializing in providing telecom, infrastructure

and business development solutions to individuals, companies and institutions throughout Africa and the Middle East. Prior to that, he worked as a test engineer for COMSAT (Communications Satellite Corporation) US and as a US representative for the London-based firm Advanced Technology International. Throughout his career in technology and development, Mr. Mekbib has remained an active advocate for human rights and social justice. Born and raised in Ethiopia and now a US citizen, he holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Electronics Engineering from Montgomery College in Maryland and a Bachelor’s in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science from the University of Maryland, both in the US.

Conference participants



Mr. Moses Mulumba is an advocate of the High Court of Uganda and currently heads the Center for Health, Human Rights and Development

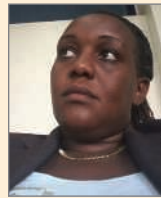
(CEHURD). His current areas of interest include global health law, human rights and equity. At CEHURD, Mr. Mulumba works with a team that has led activism through groundbreaking litigation in the areas of maternal health and access to medicines. His current work involves advocacy for better maternal health laws, including advocacy for legal reforms on abortion laws and policies in Uganda. He is a Board Member of the Uganda National Drug Authority (NDA) representing the public and also a Cluster Co-coordinator within EQUINET.



Ms. Dinah Musindarwezo is the Executive Director of the African Women's Development and Communication Network

(FEMNET), a pan-African organization advancing women's human rights and voices across Africa. Previously, Ms. Musindarwezo worked for Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), Rwanda, as a Gender and Governance Advisor and Gender Equality Specialist. She also served the Kigali City Council as Project Manager of the Agaseke Promotion Project, which aims to economically empower vulnerable women. She is a founding member and Vice President of the Rwanda Association of University Women (RAUW) and serves on the UN Women Civil Society Advisory Group for Eastern and Southern Africa. She is a co-chair of the NGO Commission on the

Status of Women in Africa, a Board Member of the Center for Citizens' Participation–African Union (CCP–AU) and Article19 Eastern Africa Office, and a Steering Committee Member of Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR) and the Post 2015 Women's Coalition. Ms. Musindarwezo holds a bachelor's degree in Development Studies from Makerere University, Uganda, and a master's degree in Gender and Development from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex.



Ms. Veronica W. Mwangi, LLB, MBA, is an advocate and a Senior Human Rights Officer at the Kenya National Commission on Human

Rights (KNCHR). Her work experience is drawn from practicing as a litigation advocate in Kenya, working in civil, commercial and criminal cases. Ms. Mwangi has also practiced as a children's advocate by representing children in court. She works as an investigator in the Commission as well as a trainer of trainers in human rights, investigations of SGBV cases, and business and human rights topics. Ms. Mwangi represents the KNCHR in the special taskforce on children's matters as well as the national advisory on counter-trafficking in persons. Ms. Mwangi is also a wife, a mother and a life coach to teenagers and young adults. She holds LLB and MBA (Strategic management) degrees from the University of Nairobi.



The Hon. Antonio A. Eduardo Namburete is a former Member of Mozambique's Parliament and Chair of the Mozambican Centre for

Multidisciplinary Media Studies. He is the founding dean of, and a senior lecturer at, the Eduardo Mondlane University's School of Communication and Arts. He has also served as Human Rights Commissioner. His professional career includes working as the Director of Research at the National Institute of Social Communication in Mozambique, researcher at the LPM Research Institute in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and foreign desk reporter at the Washington Times in Washington, DC. His extensive academic writing covers the intersection of media in gender, democracy and HIV & AIDS, as well as human rights, good governance and corruption. He holds an honor's degree in Broadcasting from the Methodist University of Sao Paulo and a master's degree in Mass Communication from Southern University in Louisiana. Dr. Namburete is currently pursuing a degree in law at the Faculty of Law at the Eduardo Mondlane University.



Ms. Evelyn Opondo, LLB is the Center for Reproductive Rights' Regional Director for Africa, where she manages the Center's

Africa program, working in five priority African countries and at the Africa regional level. Prior to joining the Center, she worked on reproductive health and rights issues in Africa, serving as the Regional Policy Associate for Ipas. She previously worked for six years for the Federation of

Women Lawyers (FIDA) Kenya, a pioneer women right's organization, where she held positions of progressively increasing responsibility, leaving the organization as a Senior Program Officer in 2010. Evelyne has also formerly worked as a State Law Officer in the Office of the Attorney General of Kenya. She has over 15 years of experience in women rights advocacy with specific interest in reproductive rights. Her key competencies include policy advocacy, project strategy development and strategic litigation. She holds an MA degree in Gender and Development from the University of Nairobi and a Bachelor of Laws degree from Pune University.



Dr. Joachim Osur is the Director of Regional Programmes and Field Offices at AMREF Health Africa, where he leads regional initiatives on

health development with particular emphasis on women and children. His policy work in Kenya includes sexual and reproductive health articles in the Constitution and a framework for enforcing the Sexual Offences Act. Dr. Osur was a pioneer for HIV and reproductive health in Kenya, and lessons from his pilot project were used worldwide to improve care. He also led the development of reproductive health service guidelines in Zambia, Uganda, Malawi, Mali and Benin, focusing on reducing unsafe abortion. Dr. Osur appeared before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations to give evidence on the effects of

US foreign policy on access to family planning in Africa. Further, he participated in shadow reporting to the UN Commission on the Rights of the Child regarding children's reproductive health in Africa. Dr. Osur holds a bachelor's degree in Medicine and Surgery, a master's degree in Public Health, and a PhD in Reproductive Health.



Dr. Boaz Otieno-Nyunya, MD, is an Associate Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, a board-certified consultant Ob/Gyn and he currently

serves as the Associate Director for Programs at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Kenya. He also serves at the Kenya Medical Association as a Convener of the Reproductive Health Committee. For over 25 years, Prof. Otieno-Nyunya has worked in the reproductive health space, specializing in sexual and reproductive health and rights, including family planning, advanced life support obstetrics, comprehensive abortion care, sexual and gender based violence and STD and HIV prevention, treatment and care. He has presented, taught and developed programs on such issues and articulated the need for more sexual and reproductive health support in Kenya. Prof. Otieno-Nyunya holds an MMed in Obstetrics and Gynecology as well as an MBChB in Medicine and Surgery, both from the University of Nairobi. He is a fellow of Contraceptive Technology Research as well as International Medical Education and Research.



Bishop Christopher Senyonjo is a clergyman and campaigner for LGBT rights in Uganda. He was elevated to bishop in the Church of Uganda in 1974


and retired in 1998. In 2001, he was barred from performing services. Whilst it is widely claimed that this is because of his stance on gay rights, the church claims that it was because of his participation in the consecration of a man as bishop of a church with which the Church of Uganda is not in communion. He has since worked with the Charismatic Church of Uganda and the progressive Episcopal Church of the United States and founded Integrity Uganda and the Saint Paul's Reconciliation and Equality Centre in Kampala. In 2006, the Church of Uganda declared him "no longer a bishop" and revoked all remaining privileges for his involvement with the Charismatic denomination. For his stance, Bishop Senyonjo has received several honors, including the Clinton Global Citizen Award, and has been invited to participate in documentaries and international speaking tours.



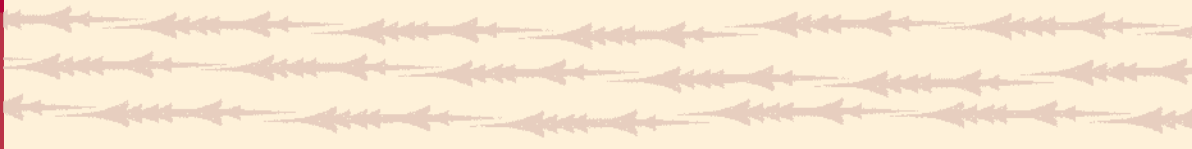
Mr. Abdullatif Shaban serves as the Director General of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM), the umbrella body of Muslim entities

in Kenya. He previously served Ipas as a consultant.





Discussion Summary



Discussion Summary

On August 23–25, 2016, Catholics for Choice came together with 25 prominent activists, academics, physicians, journalists and other thought leaders from 11 countries to Nairobi, Kenya, to discuss secularism and its relevance to good governance across Africa. The event was chaired by former Ghanaian Health Minister Ambassador Eunice Brookman-Amisshah and hosted by Catholics for Choice President Jon O’Brien. Expert facilitator Tamara Braam guided several interactive discussions.


The purpose of the meeting was to garner conceptual clarity about what a secular state means and how the separation of church and state can provide a useful framework for advancing social cohesion, tolerance and human rights, especially gender and reproductive rights on the continent.

We discussed the origins of secularism in Africa and Europe, the universality of these principles and how they have been adopted and adapted at different times. We also delved into the myriad of challenges to secularism in the African context—including the prevalence of weak and patriarchal states, the predominance of colonial religious institutions, laws and practices and the rise of religious extremist policies that reject secularism as a Western imposition. Finally, we laid out a way forward to reinforce secular principles in African politics at the local, national and international levels.



“America was founded by religious people who were running away from other religious people who were trying to kill them. And that’s why they established the separation of church and state to allow for freedom of religion and freedom from religion. Secularism is my right to believe in invisible things, but it’s also your right to believe in something different that’s invisible, or not believe in invisible things at all.”

— Mr. Jon O’Brien



Secularism: What it is, what it isn't and where it comes from

We began by delving into a discussion on the meaning and origins of secularism. This discussion was a critical point of departure for several reasons.

First, we needed a general consensus on what a secular state means and does not mean in order to understand its relevance in contemporary societies in Africa. For instance, we discussed and debunked the notion of the secular state as one that is against or that does not allow the practice of religion.

Second, we needed to unpack the origins of secularism in order to consider its universal applicability. Many authoritarians and sectarians in Africa have used the pretext that secularism is a Western concept that has been imposed upon Africans through imperialism to argue that it is incongruent with African values. However, as we deliberated the origins of secular principles, we found quite the opposite was true. While Europeans began forming secular forms of government that separated church and state during

the Enlightenment, Africa's traditional precolonial societies had separated the shrine from the state long before that. As far back as the 10th century, the Arab Empire was secular and created the conditions in which universities, intellectual inquiry and freedom of expression flourished.

As our first panel discussed, **secularism or *laïcité* in the West has roots in the French Enlightenment and was seen as the separation of church and state so as to allow the free exercise of diverse beliefs without government intervention. Thus, secularism is inextricably tied to freedom of expression, belief and association.** The French philosopher Voltaire summed it up by proclaiming, "I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it!" John Locke wrote that faith cannot be compelled by an outside force—

in other words, that the state cannot compel religion—thus laying the grounds for freedom of thought and freedom of conscience.

A secular state became especially, though not exclusively, relevant for multiethnic, multi-sectarian societies. It was the foundational principle of American democracy, with the US founding fathers looking toward Europe, and especially France, for inspiration on how best to establish good government. **Thomas Jefferson argued for a "wall of separation between church and state" that would protect the rights of every individual to freely practice their own beliefs or no beliefs.** This principle was enshrined in the First Amendment of the American constitution, which protects freedom of religion and freedom from religion.

"You have a right to wear a burkini, but you do not have the right to make a burkini a national outfit at the beach. You have a right to cover your head, but you do not have the right to make it mandatory for everyone to do that."

—Conference participant

Discussion Summary

As we discussed, the wall of separation between church and state creates the space for tolerance of people of different faiths and no faith at all. **This is quite distinct from the notion of a secular state as one that is antireligious. A secular state is not an atheist state.**

In African societies, many of which have suffered or are suffering from conflicts driven by tribal or religious grievances, the principle of the secular state as one that allows the space for tolerance is of great utility and sparked debate among our group.

The limits of tolerance and free expression were discussed. Many of us concluded that your right to free speech and religious

exercise ends where the other person's begins. A person of no faith cannot impose his or her atheism on a person of faith. And people of faith cannot impose their beliefs on others. In the current African context, this principle was best summed up by one of our participants who said:

"You have a right to wear a burkini, but you do not have the right to make a burkini a national outfit at the beach. You have a right to cover your head, but you do not have the right to make it mandatory for everyone to do that."

Another participant raised the question of whether "tolerance," particularly in strongman states in Africa, may be manipulated to draw a red line beyond

which people's rights are at the hands of the government. In some states where we have seen increasing regulation of free speech, government leaders might claim, as the participant said:

"I have the power to regulate what you say, and based on my power, I will tolerate you to a certain level to say what you want to say, and if you go beyond that, I will shut you up."

However, tolerance—defined as the absolute right of people to coexist peacefully while expressing views that others might find truly objectionable and wrong without government interference or censorship—was seen as a critical ingredient for a truly secular state.





Africa's Secular Traditions: From its precolonial origins to today

With the second panelist, former Catholic seminarian and journalist Leo Igwe, we took a deeper dive into the **precolonial origins of secularism in Africa and how it evolved, and in many ways weakened, in colonial and postcolonial governments across Africa.**

Secularism derives from the Latin word *saeculum*, which means of this temporal age in the world, as opposed to the divinely eternal realm of God. In other words, anything “secular” has to do with earthly rather than spiritual affairs. **In many of Africa’s indigenous societies, there was a separation of shrine and state, of priests and kings, of sacred and earthly affairs.**

For instance, among the Igbos in today’s southeastern Nigeria, the office of the king, the Eze, was distinct from that of the priests long before Europe’s Enlightenment. The Ezes oversaw the day-to-day administration of the community, while the priests handled spiritual matters. The priests performed sacrifices and libations and consulted with the gods. They operated under the chiefs who consulted them whenever the need arose.

Similarly, in the north of modern-day Ghana, chiefs govern the Dagomba and these chiefs are seen as the owners of the land. Meanwhile, priests are seen as the owners of the gods. The owners of the land are the political heads and people go to them for political matters. Even today, for instance, a governor visiting the

community will go to the chief. However, if rain has not fallen, the Dagomba will go to the priests who will offer a sacrifice for divine intervention.

When colonialism arrived in Africa, along with Islamic and Christian missionaries, these dynamics were disrupted, with important consequences for secularism in Africa today. Colonialists arbitrarily used laws to bring both chiefs and priests under their control and overruled indigenous forms of governance. **Despite the supposed secular nature of the colonial state, there was a strong mix of colonial politics and colonial religion because colonial government officials relied heavily on missionary churches to bring local populations under their rule and to spread and normalize colonial culture.** As Igwe described:

“[Africans] did not know who came to missionize and who came to politicize.”

Christian missionaries ran schools, hospitals and other essential services as part of and long after colonial rule. Africans serving in the colonial administration were educated by missionaries and traveled to Europe. As a result, a Westernized African elite arose that was faithful to and heavily influenced by the church. These elites often became postcolonial rulers.

Postcolonial nation building throughout Africa was supported by and intermixed with religious authority and influence. As a result, although some postcolonial states, especially those previously under French rule, enshrined secular principles in their constitutions, the separation of the church from the state has not played out

“[Africans] did not know who came to missionize and who came to politicize.”

— Mr. Leo Igwe

Discussion Summary

“There are gaps in services that people need at the local level, and in many cases the state is not providing them, but the church or the mosque is. In many cases there is no balance between the state and religious institutions at the local level—one is functioning fairly well and the other is not functioning as well.”

—Conference participant

in practice. And in some cases, the drafters of these constitutions did not officially declare a secular state, because they conflated secularism with atheism.

As Igwe argued:

“The drafters of the [Nigerian] constitution could not officially enshrine secularism due to resistance from those who were against what many believed and still believe to be a Western ideology that will prohibit religion and make atheism a state religion.”

In some states with Muslim populations, exceptions were also made to accommodate the imposition of customary or Sharia law in marriage and family matters. Consequently, Christian and Islamic influence on indigenous traditions complicated efforts to establish firmly rooted secular states in postcolonial Africa. We discussed these challenges robustly.

Our group addressed one of the chief challenges of secularism in Africa—the prevalence of weak states. In many ways, secularism assumes and espouses a balance of power between the state and the church. However, in many postcolonial African countries, churches and faith-based institutions are predominant in the administration of essential services. They have reach into remote areas of Africa that neither colonial nor postcolonial authorities have been able to functionally govern. As one participant explained:

“There are gaps in services that people need at the local level, and in many cases the state is not providing them, but the church or the mosque is. In many cases there is no balance between the state and religious institutions at the local level—one is functioning fairly well and the other is not functioning as well.”

This gap in many parts of Africa has meant that **church institutions are more trusted and have more legitimacy than state institutions.** One Kenyan participant described it in stark terms:

“There are parts of Kenya for example where you go and [the locals] only know the Catholic church because they have never seen the government. In fact, they will ask you—are you from Kenya? Because they think they are not part of Kenya.”

In some areas, the **church undertakes state-like functions**, while imposing its value system on those it services. This dynamic has also created a **sympiotic relationship between political and church leaders.** Because people are loyal to the church, church leaders in some cases recommend who should be elected.

We agreed that advancing a secular state is not only a matter of ensuring a balance or “wall of separation” between church and state at the central level, but at the local level as well. That does not mean

that we undermine or disallow the sense of community that people get from their association with a particular religion (that may include faith-based community services). Rather that there is a healthy limit between the religious and the political.

Reinforcing secularism in Africa will also require free debate about its universality and its role in allowing the space for safeguarding both traditional and contemporary values. While some African constitutions make mention of secularism, over time there has been an encroachment of religion in African politics, sometimes under the guise of “African values.” Now more than ever, religiosity and extremism of all faiths are on the rise. Our group agreed that African societies need a more robust battle of ideas to truly engender homegrown buy-in for secularism. And that means addressing thorny issues about how to balance respect for African values, without allowing it to be a pretext for imposing one set of beliefs upon others or for curtailing the universal rights for women, LGBT communities and other marginalized groups. African societies must also consider how to guarantee tolerance for the free exercise of traditional rituals like witchcraft, as well as new religions like Mormonism and evangelical movements gaining ground across Africa. These debates are necessary in order to promote truly pluralistic states not only on paper, but in practice.



Challenges to Secularism: When religion, culture and politics merge

The secular state faces unique challenges in Africa because of the complex interplay between indigenous and colonial cultures, religions and politics. Participants delved into these dynamics in interactive discussions around: **the acculturation of religion, the religionizing of culture and the religionizing of politics in contemporary Africa.**

Culture has impacted religion and vice versa in Africa. For instance, Islam in Africa certainly looks different than Islam elsewhere in the world. Conversely, some indigenous cultural practices like wedding customs have changed due to colonial religious influences. And in some countries what might have been patriarchal cultural practices like polygamy are now justified with religious pretexts. And certainly we have seen in many African countries how the introduction of colonial religions led to the spread of social norms and laws that further restrict women.

Our participants discussed the interplay between religion and politics. As mentioned earlier, because of the outsized role of churches in Africa and their ability to wield

resources, a symbiotic relationship between political and church figures is prevalent.

Politicians exploit their relationships with religious leaders to attain and hold on to power, while religious figures use their influence over politicians to impose their doctrines and beliefs on society. As one conference participant noted,

“Many of our leaders claim to be where they are because of their religious affiliations and the resources from which they benefitted. So if you went to a missionary school or relied on a missionary hospital, and you have a religious upbringing, as a leader you cannot divorce yourself from that.”

Some participants claimed that even those leaders who are not religious join

a church and use religious language to gain the trust and ultimately votes of their constituencies. The expediency of these power relationships was summed up by one Ugandan participant in this way:

“In the African continent whoever is in power and politics, uses secular and religious arguments for their own convenient purposes.”

Some of us, however, conceded that not all religious influence is negative. In some cases, faith leaders have played positive roles in promoting social justice and inter-faith dialogue and reconciliation. However, they have also wielded undue influence over political leaders on matters of public health, such as vaccines, contraception

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—Conference participant

Discussion Summary

and reproductive services. In some states, politicians have used religious pretexts to regulate what is taught in schools about science and sex.

It became clear that **there must be a line between the free exercise of religious beliefs and civic engagement and undue influence by religious leaders on public policy.** Participants underscored the importance of allowing religious authorities to express their views, so long as political leaders do not legislate based on those views. As Jon O'Brien highlighted:

"It's really dangerous if anybody is silenced. Religious authorities should be allowed to speak and be heard. It's absolutely critical for a democracy that everybody participate. But what religious figures do not have a right to do is to transfer their beliefs into laws that affect the rights of others who do not share their views or beliefs."

As Ambassador Brookman-Amissah emphasized, political leaders must also separate their personal religious beliefs from their public policy role:

"[Political figures] may be and indeed have the right to be religious in their personal capacity, but in the exercise of state authority, including in the making of laws and policies, they should not be influenced by their religion or by any religious prescription."

One Kenyan participant argued that this separation should exist not only in the function of public office, but across the public sphere:

"If I am a doctor, I should know that I am a doctor whose work is based on science. If I am a politician, there is a constitution that I should follow."

Our group also deliberated how the interplay between religion, culture and politics impacts gender and reproductive rights. Activist Fatou Sow highlighted how patriarchy within traditional cultures, politics and religions—and the rise of religious fundamentalism—has curtailed women's rights on the continent. Even when a country's constitution may delineate certain rights, women often do not enjoy these liberties in practice due to patriarchal customs and carve outs for customary and Sharia law. These carve outs often apply to family issues that most impact women, like decisions about who to marry and when and how to have children.

We discussed how often African leaders seek to disguise intolerance—including on gender and LGBT rights—as religious belief or traditional "African values" when in reality they are seeking to restrict free will, conscience and autonomy. Secularism provides a useful frame in

which to reject these repressive tactics. As Sow explained, a secular state rejects the imposition of one set of beliefs in the public space; it safeguards the right to think freely, believe freely and act freely with bodily autonomy and integrity:

"Secularism is the only way I can say my body is mine. We cannot pass a law against my body because of what is in the Bible, or in the Quran."

Our participants also discussed the utility of promoting secular approaches to curb the rise of extremism on the continent. The last presenter, public policy advocate Kunle Olulode, told the cautionary tale of a case in Nigeria in which a journalist's controversial comments about the Prophet during the infamous Miss World contest in Lagos set off an explosion of sectarian violence. As the incident underscored, **the weakness of civil society left a void for extremist responses.** Thus, not only politicians, but ordinary citizens and opinion shapers must promote secularist approaches to create the space for tolerance of diverse beliefs and peaceful free expression. In Africa, weak states have allowed for the ascendance of religious institutions; but so too the lack of strong civil society and free press has left a vacuum for fundamentalism to take hold.

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—Ambassador Eunice Brookman-Amissah



“Secularism is the only way I can say my body is mine. We cannot pass a law against my body because of what is in the Bible, or in the Quran.”

—Dr. Fatou Sow



A Way Forward

Now more than ever, secularism is necessary as the rise of sectarian violence and religious extremism threatens peace and human rights on the continent. Participants also recognized the importance of secularism to promote accountability in Africa.

In other words, **citizens should hold their political leaders accountable for their success in improving governance and delivery of services rather than rewarding them based on sectarian interests or affiliations.** Given the timeliness of this discussion, our participants laid out concrete steps that governments and other actors, including our group, could take to promote secular approaches in Africa.

Several members of our group argued that **many African constitutions, at least on paper, provide a legal framework from which to advocate for secular principles.** For instance, one participant cited provisions in Article 29 of the Ugandan constitution, which safeguards freedom of conscience, expression, movement,

religion and assembly. Another participant heralded elements of Kenya’s constitution as a good model, including chapter 10 on how public officials should be vetted and recruited based on merit (and not on religious affiliation).

Dr. Sow underscored the importance **not only of national frameworks, but also regional accords in providing the basis from which to counter the use of “African values” as a pretext to reject secularism and to undermine women’s bodily autonomy in particular.** She stated:

“You cannot say abortion is not an African value, because Africans sat and deliberated and agreed [in the Maputo Protocols] that from now on as Africans we are accepting abortion under a set of circumstances.”

These frameworks are starting points for advocating and defending secularism in the local context. However, we agreed that the **secular state is not a final destination point, but rather a dynamic concept. Political leaders, opinion shapers and civil society must constantly reinforce these principles as guiding norms that advance good governance and human rights.** In order to normalize these principles in any society, a secular education that keeps religious beliefs separate from knowledge building and the exercise of reason, is critical.

In conclusion, our group sought consensus and agreed on a statement of principles that will guide our efforts to advance and reinforce the secular state as foundational to democratic rule, peaceful coexistence and respect for human rights across Africa (see page 4).

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Recognizing our own responsibility in advancing secularism, we committed to take several concrete actions outlined below:

- To promote secular principles, adapted to local contexts and messaging, among our own constituencies including our families, work, churches or mosques.
- To identify and engage champions of secularism at the national and international level.
- To continue this dialogue with one another, including through the creation of a listserv, to share challenges and opportunities for advancing secularism across diverse contexts.
- To create a space to take this conversation to the country level, so civil society organizations, elected representatives and individuals have an opportunity to consider what we have discussed.
- To get stakeholders to commit funding so individuals can conduct more research into how a secularist approach can help mitigate conflicts in Africa, including by exploring local African secularism and developing a body of knowledge that maps secularism from diverse stakeholder and local perspectives.
- To facilitate the creation of community-level spaces for dialogue and engagement with politicians and policymakers about what they see as opportunities that secularism presents in the African context. This includes the creation of spaces for dialogue in which communities come together to share common values and accept one another's differences. And to then identify best practices for acceptance and peaceful disagreement.







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Whence Secularism in Africa?



Mr. Leo Igwe

Recently, the relationship between the state and the church, mosque, shrine and temple has generated heated debates in many countries across Africa.

These debates have focused on issues such as the rights of homosexuals, the reproductive and family rights of women, the adoption of Sharia law, the wearing of the hijab, state sponsorship of pilgrimages, regulation of religious preaching, morning religious devotion in schools, child marriage and others. These debates often pit religious organizations against each other, and contest the place of religion within the state. They testify to the growing influence of religious organizations and the dilemma of governments in postcolonial Africa in dealing with policy or legislation that religious interest groups deem incompatible with their faith and teachings. To legitimize their positions, governments sometimes invoke the implicit or explicit secular character of the state. However, such references to secularism are often met by opposition

and objections, especially from religious organizations that claim that their interests have been ignored. They usually criticize secularism as an alien or foreign ideology that has no legitimate stake in African society and politics. Interestingly, however, these opponents of secularism are also imported, as they are local organizations representing foreign religions.

Origin of the word

From the Latin word *saeculum*, the term secularism means generation or age. It is also used to mean “this world,” or worldly. American scholar John Shook claims that in Latin, the term *saeculum* was useful for distinguishing this temporal age of the world from the divinely eternal realm of God. Anything secular has to do with earthly rather than spiritual affairs. Thus,

secularism has an origin that seems to not accommodate religion, at least in its absoluteness, because mainstream religions see the temporal and divine worlds as indistinguishable.

However, the British writer George Jacob Holyoake, who invented the term “secularism,” explains that secularism is not anti-Christianity, and by implication not anti-religion. He describes the term as the viewpoint that promotes a social order that is separate from the religious order without actively dismissing or criticizing religious beliefs. He states that secularism is not against nor questioning of Christianity, but is independent of it. Secularism is linked to the West not only by virtue of its roots in the Latin language or its coinage by Jacob Holyoake, but also in its ideological tie to the Enlightenment.

The connection with the Enlightenment

Secular ideas were rooted in the intellectual movement of 17th- and 18th-century Europe called the Enlightenment. This movement gave reason a central place of authority and legitimacy. It questioned the dogmas of the church and opposed absolute power and authority. John Locke, Denis Diderot, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu and Baruch Spinoza were among the

philosophers whose ideas shaped the Enlightenment. They espoused the values of liberty, progress, scientific thinking, tolerance, constitutional government and separation of church and state.

The Enlightenment modernized and secularized Europe, moving it away from religious totalitarianism and theocratic control. It influenced the French Revolution, a wind of social and political change that swept across French society from 1789 to 1799. The revolution led to clashes between church and state that brought the church under the control of the state and culminated in the law of 1905 that institutionalized the separation of church and state. This law, which is a landmark in European secularism, ensures state neutrality on religious matters and recognition of individual rights. Thus, the French revolution led to a shift in the political paradigm from a state based on the divine rights of kings to a state based on the consent of the governed.

These secular ideas and events not only transformed the politics of Europe, but also informed the social and political ideologies of European colonialists who introduced state institutions to Africa in the late 19th century. However, a pertinent question remains: Is there no tradition of secularism in Africa?

A secular approach in precolonial Africa

What existed before colonialism remains a mooted question. Prior to the colonization of Africa, various empires, kingdoms and chiefdoms existed in the region and were administered based on models of indigenous governance. Different relationships existed between the shrine and the state, the religious order and the governmental order, the sacred and the secular. There were informal secular approaches to governance within these kingdoms and chiefdoms despite a lack of codification.

To illustrate this point, I will draw examples from my native ethnic group, the Igbo in Southeast Nigeria and my academic ethnic group the Dagomba in the north of Ghana. Before colonialism, these groups were organized and some of their political structures exist even today. Among the Igbos, the offices of the “king” (*Eze*) were distinct from those of the priest (*dibia afa* or *dibia mmuo*). There was a separation of powers, based on oral tradition that was handed down from one generation to another.

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The Eze were the political heads and oversaw the day-to-day administration of the community, while the priests handled spiritual matters. They performed sacrifices, poured libations and consulted the gods. The priests operated under the chiefs who consulted them whenever the need arose.

However, the case of the Dagomba provides a more interesting insight into precolonial secular approaches to politics. Before the colonization of the Northern Territories, chiefs governed the Dagomba communities. Interestingly, the chiefs are addressed as the owners of the land. For instance *Chagnaa* is the owner of the land of *Changli*. The priests are called *Bouiglana* or *Tindana*, which roughly means the “owners of the gods.” Thus among the Dagomba, there is a distinction between the “owners of the land” and the “owners of the gods.” Although exceptional cases do exist in which the powers of the chief and the priests were invested in one person. And in such cases, political and religious orders mix and merge. In the case of the Igbo, the owners of the gods are in charge of the religious order and operate under the political heads, the owners of the land. However, with the introduction of Islam, which is now the dominant religion, the Dagomba added new owners of the gods to their religious order, which are the mallams and the imams.

Secularism and the colonial state

Colonialism brought profound changes to this sociopolitical order, because Europeans introduced state institutions that were based on Western sociopolitical ideologies. The introduction of state mechanisms by colonialists was not a democratic process instituted in accordance with the Enlightenment value of the “consent of the governed” or respect for individual liberty. Nevertheless, colonial structures would eventually lay the foundation for modern-day democracy and constitutional governance in the region.

The colonialists arbitrarily used laws and policies to bring the chiefs and kings under the colonial state administration and overruled aspects of the indigenous sociopolitical ideologies and practices that they deemed incompatible with their Western models of government. It is important to note that despite the proclaimed secular nature of the colonial state, there was a mix between colonial politics and colonial religion. The colonial government had strong links with Christian missionary churches that operated Western-style schools where Africans were educated and later recruited to serve in the colonial administration.

Apart from those educated in mission schools, Africans who were educated in Europe during the colonial period were influenced by Western political ideologies and philosophies, including secularism, socialism and communism. And these largely Westernized African elites were at the forefront of the struggle against colonialism and the formation of postcolonial states.

Secularism and the postcolonial challenge

At independence, the African political elite adopted constitutions modeled after those of their former colonizers. African countries, particularly former French colonies enshrined secular principles in their constitutions, while former British colonies such as Nigeria made provisions that prohibited state religion, without explicitly stating that the state was secular. The drafters of these constitutions, however, could not officially declare and enshrine secularism due to resistance from those who were against what many believed—and still believe—to be a Western ideology that would prohibit religion and make atheism the state religion.

Despite the proclaimed secular nature of the colonial state, there was a mix between colonial politics and colonial religion.

In addition, the constitutions provided for the application of religious and customary laws to issues related to marriage and family. Even the constitutional provision for freedom of religion or conscience is often used by those pushing a political religious agenda and contesting the secular approach to issues. With the spread of democracy and participatory governance in a region that is predominantly religious, religious organizations have been increasingly influential in public life and the secular approach to issues such as human rights has faced opposition.

Conclusion

Secular ideas from the West influenced African state institutions, despite the existence of a secular tradition that predates colonialism in Africa. During the colonial era, a secular approach to state formation and administration applied in spite of the strong ties between the colonial state and the colonial church. However, in postcolonial Africa there has been constant violation of the secular principle that was espoused at independence. This violation is not because the secular approach is not in agreement with African communal values

or because there is a cultural disdain for individual liberty. Rather it is because Africa is in need of its own version of the Enlightenment and French-style revolution to provide a social, cultural and political base for the operation of a secular state.

However, this revolutionary process is going to be more complicated than what took place in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries because in Africa the secular forces are not just up and against a church but several churches, mosques, shrines and temples with links to the East and West. This means that Africa will eventually have to forge its own models of secularism given its peculiar religious and political predicaments. Until these religious structures and operators are brought under the state, the secular approach to issues will continue to face stiff resistance and secularism will continue to remain on the margins of African politics.





What Secularism Means for African Women's Rights and Citizenship



Dr. Fatou Sow

I join this conversation as an academic researcher in sociology and an activist, as the Director of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) and a member of several women and civil society organizations. In both roles, I use a feminist critique to understand and analyse the status of African women in the past, present and future.

Secularism has been a critical issue for women's organizations and women human rights defenders. Women's rights and citizenship start in the family. In societies with predominantly Muslim populations, however, it has been difficult to set up a body of family laws encompassing all citizens regardless of their faith because this is seen as contradicting Sharia law.

I am here to say that secularism is an issue for women, as stated by Marieme Helie Lucas, founder of Secularism is a Women's

Issue (SIAWI). Women's movements are part of the debate on secularism, as religion and culture shape women's status and rights.

Secularism or laïcité today

As a concept, secularism is rooted in various historical contexts that make it difficult to define it properly without taking history into account. We generally agree that secularism relates to politics and religion, but the experiences of

For me, secularism mainly refers to the religious neutrality of the state in the management of the country and its politics.

secularism and secularization might differ from one context to the other. We can draw examples from European countries that, although they claim to share the same Christian culture, have different perspectives on secularism (Igwe 2014).

I would like to define French secularism, or *laïcité*, because Senegal and many former French colonies in West and Central Africa have inscribed *laïcité* as a basic principle in their constitutions. Without a doubt, *laïcité* refers to the separation of politics from religion. The concept of *laïcité* arose from French history. The secularization process in France since the French Revolution was “an emancipation movement confronted with a church that the tumultuous history of France had made into a hegemonic (even monopolistic) institution in the universe of symbols” (Baubérot 1990). The church was at the heart of political power in monarchical France—it consecrated the crowning of the kings of France. The French Revolution abolished the monarchy. Secularism was established as a political measure with the Law of 1905 that enshrined the separation of church and state (Bourdieu, 1971; Touraine 1992). A new government was set up where “the Republican State, as an emanation of the democratic ideal, had as its ambition the replacement of the all-embracing function of the Catholic Church in its temporal capacity” (Bencheikh 2005: 113). It did not exclude religion, but proclaimed the separation of the state and religion. In France itself, there is a difference between

laïcité and the process of laicization or secularization. French *laïcité* would be, in fact, “the political product of a historical secularization process” (Monod 2007). Secularization has also been linked to the modernization of societies.

For me, secularism mainly refers to the religious neutrality of the state in the management of the country and its politics. Laws passed in parliament in secular states should not avert or stifle free debate on societal issues by referencing “holy” principles. In most African countries, including in North African countries where Islam is a state religion, there are different ethnicities, cultures and faiths. Whenever a law is passed that is based on the principles of a leading ethnic group, culture or faith, it will inevitably marginalize or exclude minority groups.

The intervention of religion in politics is an important challenge. Most of our states establish a separation of powers in order to prevent one power—executive, judicial or legislative—from exercising the core functions of another. The current rise of religious fundamentalism, however, has impacted this balance of power. For instance, in Senegal people have started to refer to religious leaders as constituting a symbolic “fourth power.” Religious figures have become increasingly more involved in political debates and relied upon as political intermediaries. In the nineties, cardinals and archbishops led national conferences and peace talks in Central

Africa. When Mali became divided by sectarianism in 2012, Imam Mahmoud Dicko, Head of the Haut Conseil Islamique du Mali, proposed to be an intermediary during the political negotiations between the state and separatist Northern Mali movements. Yet, Dicko was also the radical Muslim leader who led popular riots to force former Malian President Toumani Touré to ban the progressive family code that was passed by Parliament in 2008. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is currently seeking the support of religious leaders to support peace talks in Guinea Bissau, which is plagued by chronic political instability.

In Senegal we have also seen a gradual erosion of *laïcité*. Senegal’s first President, Leopold Sedar Senghor, was a Christian elected by a local constituency including a large part of the peasantry that was predominantly Muslim. There was a separation of the state and the mosque, although Senghor maintained relationships of domination and collaboration with the leaders of Senegal’s Muslim Brotherhood. President Diouf who succeeded him was not as strong of a president, so he had to negotiate and share power with religious leaders. Then in 2000, President Abdoulaye Wade brought religious figures into greater political power when, after the very first democratic transfer of power in Senegalese electoral history, he went to his Marabout and thanked him for his prayers on national television.

In Senegal, we have also seen a gradual erosion of the *laïcité*.

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Lastly, secularization has been described as a way to modernity in the West. As Africans, can we claim that Westernization is the sole path to modernization?

Religion, culture and politics

While women's movements in Africa have tried to promote new social contracts that advance social justice and gender equality, they have faced continual backlash by those who seek to revive religious and cultural values that hold women back. While secularization of the law has helped to promote women's rights, especially after 30 years of major international summits and accords on women, the environment, human rights, populations and more, these achievements continue to be challenged by a large number of ordinary people and fundamentalist groups.

State and religious authorities across Africa maintain close ties. This mingling of religion and politics has become evident in public debates around sexual freedom, contraception, abortion, AIDs prevention, sexual orientation, same-sex parenting and bioethics (euthanasia, medically assisted conception, genetic testing, cloning, stem cell research, etc.). These questions pose moral challenges to individuals' identity and religion.

They also illustrate the interplay between religion, culture, and politics, including the:

- **Acculturation of religion**, which I understand to be the cultural dimension of religion, or various practices that are cultural and not religious, such as female genital mutilation, banning women from driving, or wearing a burqa;
- **Religionizing of culture**, or when culture is used in the same way as religion to define identity; and the
- **Religionizing of politics**, which I take from Karima Bennoune, an American-Algerian political scientist, who uses this term to explain the use of religion for political purposes.

Karima Bennoune, a Law Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, described the religionizing of politics in her analysis of US President Barack Obama's first visit to Cairo:

"In his celebrated 2009 Cairo speech, US President Obama laudably aimed to reach out a much-needed hand of friendship to Muslim-majority societies across the globe. However, his embrace of a confessional worldview in that address was worrying. Speaking to those gathered at Cairo University, the President focused not on citizenship, or national or regional identities, but

solely on presumed religious identities, thereby casting Muslims as a sort of monolithic bloc of people who are defined by their religious belief. In addition, he repeatedly quoted from religious texts. This article asks how using such a religious lexicon in political discourse affects the separation of religion and state. It also argues that religionizing politics unwittingly plays into the hands of fundamentalists" (2011).

Increased religious radicalism among all faiths is reshaping the relationship between religion and politics. Religious groups are being imbued with a "mission" to lead society and to transform social contracts, which is based on a very specific view of the sacred and which may diverge from the original interpretation of their religion. Many of these religious groups want to impose a society that is completely based on conservative religious norms, which they themselves define.

Secularism and women's rights

Secularism does not transform the gendered nature of religions. But it has to address it. In the birth of modern nation-states, religion went out of the public sphere, but it never left the personal and individual sphere. It remained in the realm

Some countries have carved out space in the law for the imposition of religious dictates concerning the family, which impacts women's rights the most.

of family, of communities and of religious institutions, which are constantly the basis for creating and recreating political power.

Religious institutions often provide spaces and social networks that the secular state has not been able to provide. In Muslim societies, brotherhoods and dahiras (faith-based organizations where women organize religious events) offer a space for communities to help each other and collaborate. As a result, there is a false division between the public sphere and the private domain. Compounding this dynamic is the critical role religious institutions have played and still play in the provision of health and educational services throughout Africa.

Also, some countries have carved out space in the law for the imposition of religious dictates concerning the family, which impacts women's rights the most. Laws that recognize men as head of the family, that protect the indissolubility of marriage as a sacrament or that do not recognize the rights of children born outside of wedlock are all based on patriarchal religious rules that are shared among Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

Allowing religious principles to dictate family laws often means reinforcing gender inequality and control over women's bodies

Sharia law is considered fundamental for many Muslims, even though there are variations of Sharia that communities create themselves. Sharia regulates prayer, fasting, marriage, divorce, widowhood and the laws of inheritance. It includes a dress code as well as other codes of conduct. Sharia is at the centre of current debates on Islam, secularism and modernity.

Muslims, whether fundamentalist or not, have always insisted on respect for Islamic values in managing male and female relations within the family. Niger and Chad do not yet have secular family codes because of their adherence to Sharia law. The majority of Muslim countries continue to elaborate and revise their family codes in an effort to reconcile their interpretation of Sharia with reforms to modernize the law. Political leaders typically take many precautions to not hurt the spirit of the Quran.

Senegal was the first Muslim sub-Saharan African country to have implemented a secular code that applied to all communities in 1973. But this code leaves room for interpretation by citizens on many civil and religious matters. This has led to conflicts between the state

and Muslim organizations that want to impose a literal interpretation of the Quran on society. Family laws are often at the center of these political controversies. For instance, efforts to end polygamy, address gender inequality in inheritances, and other matters affecting women's rights run up against the need to respect Sharia law. Thus, in Senegal and elsewhere, there are legal provisions drawn or inspired by Sharia that have institutionalized gender inequality in state constitutions and in social codes that uphold traditionalist views about the sexual, matrimonial and social behavior of women.

Yet, women's rights activists and supporters of Sharia disagree about the existence of gender inequality and discrimination. For Sharia supporters, gender inequality is not at issue, because all believers (men and women) are allegedly equal before God with no intercessors. However, in the famous verse 34 of Sura 4, the Quran emphasizes: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other; and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient to their guard." So if the husband is the guard of the spouse, how can she control her body, sexuality and fertility? This notion is what guarantees the power of men over women in Muslim countries.





What does religion, culture and politics have to do with my body and isn't my body mine? It is very important to promote a human rights approach in which citizens, and women in particular, can be involved in decisions and policies about their bodies. We cannot let patriarchal bodies continue to dictate women's health and rights.

This divergence of views is why supporters of Sharia have resisted recognizing questions of discrimination raised by the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). They have expressed reservations over issues of gender equality before the law or over nationality, marriage, divorce and inheritance issues.

At the United Nations and other international forums, religious fundamentalists have contested efforts to address gender discrimination. Religious figures from the Vatican, as well as Mullahs from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and elsewhere attend international conferences on human rights to assert their views. And often, they weigh in on and influence decisions in women's conferences, with the complicity or indifference of state actors. The United States has also been complicit in allowing religious actors to dictate foreign policy, as the Bush administration did with the imposition of the global gag rule.

In March 2009, the UN Human Rights Council once again passed a resolution, urging member states to put laws in place

to prevent criticism of religion, specifically mentioning Islam. Members of the Human Rights Council voted 23 in favor of the resolution, while 11 nations opposed it and 13 countries abstained from voting. This vote had a profound impact on the ability of women's organizations to contest the imposition of religious laws in Muslim countries. The resolution can now "be used to silence progressive voices who criticize laws and customs that are based on religious texts and precepts" (WLUML, 2009).

In light of these developments, we have to raise the questions: What does religion, culture and politics have to do with my body and isn't my body mine? It is very important to promote a human rights approach in which citizens, and women in particular, can be involved in decisions and policies about their bodies. We cannot let patriarchal bodies continue to dictate women's health and rights.

At the international level, most African states have signed and ratified international human rights treaties (although the United States has not). Thus, we can cite the International Covenant

on Civil and Political Rights; the African Charter of Human and People's Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discriminations against Women; the Optional Protocol and the Convention on the Rights of the Child to advance and support women's rights on the continent. Most African states also ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women. They drew plans of action from international conferences, such as the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the Women's protocols of Beijing and others, into national programs or policies. In theory, international laws have precedence over national laws.

However, it is difficult to enforce most international treaties and bring about gender justice in the law due to opposition by domestic leaders, such as parliamentarians, and societies themselves. Thus, we must advance debate on these questions—and address resistance by religious groups—to establish truly secular states that can protect gender equality in Africa.

Religion, the State and Medical Services in Africa



Dr. Joachim Osur

The concept of secularism raises controversy in most parts of Africa. In a continent where people not only worship, but fear God through the religions that they profess, secularism is taken to mean nonbelief in God.

This definition of secularism could not be further from the truth. On the contrary, secularism proclaims mutual respect between religions and the state. It requires noninterference on religious matters by the state and noninterference on state matters, whether through executive, judicial or legislative processes, by religious institutions.

Advocates of secularism are increasingly concerned with the way states are handling this relationship. Most modern-day countries are bound to have many religions represented among their people. In Africa, there are people who practice traditional religions. There are countries like Kenya, where 85 percent of citizens are Christian. Even within Christianity, there are various denominations with different ways of perceiving God. In other countries Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists are the majority.

If religion were not separated from the state, a religion with a majority of adherents in a country could easily push its beliefs in legislation, the judiciary and the application of executive powers. There would be laws derived from the Bible, the Quran, or any other code that the majority religion uses. The same laws would be translated to national policies, standards and guidelines. The religious institution with majority control would impose its beliefs on nonadherents.

This is not a position a country would want to find itself in; it is recipe for chaos. People not part of the dominant religion would feel discriminated against and disenfranchised. As we have seen before, they may rather die for their own beliefs than join the religion backed by the government. The Sudanese civil wars, which led to the country breaking into two, were partly because of this political-

religious imbalance; there many South Sudanese felt discriminated against because the Khartoum government was imposing Islamic law upon them. A similar situation has arisen in Somalia, which has led to the current conflict with no end in sight.

These principles also apply to the practice of medicine in Africa. Healthcare is typically a function of government, with the practice of medicine highly controlled by law due to its sensitive nature. Unfortunately, public health laws, policies, standards and guidelines are commonly shaped by influential religious institutions in Africa.

For instance, age-appropriate sex education increases the competence of young people to make healthy decisions about their sexuality, yet almost all African countries have failed to develop or enforce sex education in schools. The result has been a backlash wherein young people experiment sexually, leading to early pregnancies, teenage motherhood and early marriages. Even more pressing is the increase in new HIV infections among young people. Most countries are now resorting to putting young, HIV-positive people on medicine, but do not implement sexual education that would tackle the root causes of the problem out of fear that the dominant religious institutions will fight back.

Access to family planning also remains a great challenge in Africa, with most countries having a contraceptive prevalence rate of less than 40 percent. While many countries do have good policies on family planning, religious opposition leads to great difficulty in implementing them. In some religions, adherents who are found to be using family planning are discriminated against. This is despite the fact that there is evidence that use of family planning services and products better lives, improves maternal and child health and prevents premature mortality.

Then there is the treatment of infertility through in vitro fertilization (IVF). This is a service that is rarely available in government health facilities despite the many women with infertility problems that might otherwise use such a service. While available in Kenya, there is considerable opposition to providing this treatment from religious institutions. The bone of contention has been that same-sex couples have previously used IVF to have children. As such, some religious lobby groups worry that making the service available will encourage same-sex marriages. Religious opposition has stalled passage of a bill to make IVF more readily available, forcing the government to not only take science, but also religious views into account in this public policy decision.

Abortion is another example of how religious views influence health laws

and policies. The Constitution of Kenya proclaims that life begins at conception, a clause which was introduced by the church with the hope of curbing abortions. Of course, the clause is superfluous since it is impossible for a woman to know the day conception happens. In both Kenya and Uganda, however, abortion service guidelines were suspended after religious groups complained to the government. This is despite the fact that these provisions were developed by the governments themselves based on the science of medicine and good public health approaches.

In Zambia, the preamble of the constitution declares the country a Christian nation. How this declaration should affect government policy has not been fully explored. When it comes to the issue of abortion however, antichoice groups have used the clause to stop reproductive health services. This has led to abortion guidelines, just like in Kenya and Uganda, being suspended.

In summary, there is no end to the examples of religious interference in the development and implementation of healthcare laws, policies and guidelines in Africa. The result has been that sometimes medical policies are not based on scientific evidence, but rather on the religious views of a particular group. It is no wonder that Africa has failed to make significant progress in achieving the aspiration of quality healthcare for all.

While many countries do have good policies on family planning, religious opposition leads to great difficulty in implementing them.

The Future of Secularism in Africa from the Bikini to the Burkini



Mr. Kunle Olulode

The future of secularism in Africa depends on a contemporary appreciation of what secularism is and what it is not.

Many African states recognized, almost instinctively, at the point of independence in the 1950s and 1960s, that a secularist model of governance offered the best way forward constitutionally. However, for allegedly cultural and social reasons many African states have been unable in practice to establish a clear separation between church and state or any of the key features we would associate with a truly secular nation. The challenge of secularism in Africa in the 21st century is precisely how it translates from theory to practice. Political leaders have vacillated between seeing secularism as the ideal form of government on the one hand and a Western contraption that is “not appropriate” for Africa on the other.

For instance, in the early days when President Gadhafi came to power in Libya he declared in an interview: “Once a ruler becomes religious, it becomes impossible

for you to debate with him. Once someone rules in the name of your religion your lives become hell.” Yet this same leader who flirted with pan-Arabism and pan-Africanism would later say in 2007 on Libyan state TV that: “All those believers who do not follow Islam are losers,” adding, “We are here to correct the mistakes in the light of the teachings of the Quran.” This kind of contradiction is a common feature of African social and political narratives, so much so that its impact can often be dramatic and brutal.

In 2002, desperately keen to recast its image internationally, the government of Nigeria heavily backed the Miss World beauty pageant taking place in the Nigerian capital of Abuja. However, viewed by many conservative Muslims and Christians to be an unwelcome development, the pageant sparked demonstrations, especially in mostly

Muslim Northern Nigeria. One of the judges, Bianca Jagger, and several contestants took a stand in support of Nigerian Amina Lawal, who had been condemned to death by stoning by a regional Sharia court because of alleged adultery. Lawal's campaign became an international cause from Abuja to London.

On November 16th, an article written by rookie journalist Isioma Daniel for the Lagos-based Christian newspaper *This Day* commented on the pageant and argued: "The Muslims thought it was immoral to bring ninety-two women to Nigeria and ask them to revel in vanity. What would Mohammed think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from one of them."

Isioma Daniel's article, combined with Lawal's campaign, sparked outrage among Muslims in the Kaduna region. From November 20th–23rd, the city of Kaduna became the stage of bloody riots between Muslims and Christians. In the end, 215 people died and 1600 were injured. The offices of *This Day* in Kaduna were burnt to the ground. On November 26th in a local radio broadcast, Islamic clerics from Zamfara State issued a fatwa against Isioma Daniel for insulting the prophet. The fatwa constituted a death sentence, and all Muslims worldwide were called upon to murder her. The deputy governor of Zamfara, Mamuda Aliyu Shinkafi, declared, "Like Salman Rushdie, the blood of Isioma

Daniel can be shed. It is binding for all Muslims, wherever they are, to consider the killing of the writer as a religious duty." Isioma Daniel eventually fled the country to Norway and remains to this day on Amnesty International's case list.

It is important to understand that the violence and intolerance of the public and regional government figures had little to do with beauty contests or provocative journalism and everything to do with an absence of clear secularist thought and leadership. Constitutionally, Nigeria may be secular. But in practice, concessions have been made to religious groups in the northern states where Sharia law operates alongside and outside of formal civil law. Lawal and the pageant were simply triggers that exposed contradictions at the heart of Nigerian society. Also, the Kaduna region was about to have elections shortly thereafter in 2003. During the riots, eyewitnesses saw election posters being held up as the violence ensued. In the absence of a truly secular state and leadership, political power struggles can easily take a religious form, which has very little to do with the real issues themselves.

This kind of scenario is not distinctly African, as the current furor over the burkini in France illustrates. European political leaders—like leaders in Nigeria—are just as keen to get involved in the issue of women's bodies and determine who controls what they should look like and

what they should wear. The recent burkini ban affair in France has provoked volatile responses both online among the tweeting classes and offline with radicals who have rushed to defend the notion of a French secularist tradition. Their cause on the surface seems reasonable and just, ideas that speak to a modern audience who seek the liberation of all women.

However, we must also consider whether true secularism exists in the French context, where equality may be espoused in principle, but the ability to exercise equal freedom of expression is absent for Africans generally and Muslims specifically. Take for instance, journalist Alison Pearson's comments when considering the burkini ban in the UK's *Daily Mail*:

"I am afraid that the fact that a woman may 'choose' to wear a burkini does not mean that her 'choice' must always be respected. Not if it ends up intimidating other Muslim women into feeling ashamed for exposing their own flesh, making integration even harder. It is not what the burkini is, but the poisonous ideology it represents."

In the secular sense, Pearson and the position of the mayors can only be viewed as reactionary.

But also consider the view of Aheda Zanetti, the Australian who designed the burkini. She states that her reason for creating the design was simply so that

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Muslim girls could participate in sports; she is clear that the garb has no religious significance whatsoever. The designer simply wanted to find a way that would enable Muslim women to swim. But even if there was religious justification, would it be reasonable to ban a type of swimwear? I do not think so.

Indeed, Pearson admits that it is not what the garment does, but what it represents, which is a problem for her. In other words, the burkini is merely a vehicle for opposing a violent form of Islamic radicalism. In Pearson's view, the burkini is equal to an assault weapon used for, as she says, a "poisonous ideology." Will this type of cynicism strengthen secularism or weaken it in Africa and Europe? I think the latter.

In basic terms, secularism is freedom of religion from the state and freedom of the state from religion. Secularism offers the potential to advance human rights, which is tied to autonomy and the right to think freely and believe freely. It can create an expanded sense of our humanity and an ability to shape and strengthen civil society.

Finally, looking toward the future, there are three key themes that will support and shape secularization in Africa:

Firstly, we must reject the idea that Africa is unique in some way from other continents and that the separation between church and state is impossible. This is a fallacy. Local conditions may differ in individual states and across regions, but universal acceptance of secularist principles can improve the development of African civil society. Nowhere does a pure secular society exist, even in the West. For example, in England the monarch is both head of state and head of the Anglican Church. However, the two functions are resolutely held to be separate. Thus, local customs and practices do mean a degree of adaptation of secular principles. But a secular state should not be compromised to the point in which legal systems are inconsistent in their application and there is an absence of freedom of the press or basic human rights, such as the right to vote or the rights of women.

Secondly, we must rebuild secular politics. There is no doubt that the tremendous promise of social advances and the failure of political parties to deliver in the postcolonial era has opened up a vacuum in which nonsecular solutions have entered. This has intensified religious, tribal and regional differences. Nepotism and corruption have only made things worse, leading to the overall rejection of

secular politics. Repairing this situation is not going to be easy, but it must happen. Secularism can and will further democracy and the rule of law by protecting the rights of religious minorities.

Thirdly, we must make economic progress. Economic development is not essential to the development of a secular state, but it does make it a lot easier to open up the space for secular dialogue if people are able to consider life beyond mere day-to-day survival. The World Economic Forum and a host of research think-tanks such as the Brenthurst Foundation are optimistic in their view of Africa's economic prospects leading up to 2020. There is a general consensus that Africa must implement economic reforms and improve governance in order to grow at a rate of at least 6 percent annually, the minimum that most countries will require to reduce poverty. Growth will not solve all problems, but it will allow African countries considerable leeway in addressing the other problems that they confront. It is hard to see how African countries can address the complex political, social and health agendas that they face without an expansion of regional and nationwide economies. African countries must grow, or civil society and the secularization of society will remain limited too.



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The Global Interfaith and Secular Alliance

This meeting was held on behalf of the Global Interfaith and Secular Alliance (GISA). Working for Reproductive and Sexual Health and Rights, GISA is a coalition of faith-based and secular organizations from around the world working to counter religious extremist forces that seek to curtail global progress on reproductive and sexual rights.

GISA's three-point strategic agenda is centered on:

- Creating knowledge and generating evidence regarding the negative impact of religious extremism on sexual and reproductive health and rights globally.
- Building the capacity of allies to effectively counter religious extremist opposition to sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Utilizing evidence-based advocacy before international arenas to promote woman-centered, rights-based policies and programs.

Catholics for Choice shapes and advances sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women's well being, and respect and affirm the moral capacity of women and men to make sound decisions about their lives.

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