

## Secularism and Youth: A Contextual Moral Theological Response

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the influence of secularism on youth, highlighting its impact on moral reasoning and spiritual identity. It argues that secularism's emphasis on autonomy and relativism contributes to ethical disorientation among young people. In response, the study proposes a contextual moral theological framework. It proceeds by defining secularism, analyzing its underlying causes, its impacts, and offering a constructive moral theological and pastoral engagement to restore ethical clarity and spiritual depth.

**KEYWORDS:** *Secularism, Youth, Materialism, Poverty, Globalization, Moral Relativism.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Secularism has become a major force in shaping the lives of young people today. It challenges traditional religious values and alters how youth understand morality and spirituality. This article explores its impact on their moral choices and spiritual identity. It argues that secularism's emphasis on autonomy, relativism, and detachment from religious traditions leads to increasing moral and spiritual disorientation. The Church is called to respond with a contextual moral theological approach that addresses both the intellectual and existential concerns of young people. The discussion is structured in four parts: first, conceptual clarification of secularism; second, an analysis of the factors drawing youth toward secular ideologies; third, an evaluation of the impact of secular attitudes; and fourth, a contextualized moral theological and pastoral response aimed at reengaging youth in ethical depth and spiritual integrity.

#### 1. The Concept of Secularism

In today's dynamic world, young people are rewriting the rules of belief and identity. Faith, tradition, and culture no longer come in fixed packages. Many youth are embracing secularism, not as rebellion, but as freedom of choice. According to the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, the term derives from the Latin *saecularis*, meaning "the time, the age, and the world... secular stands in contrast to the sacred."<sup>1</sup> It signifies a life guided by human reasoning, autonomy, and worldly experience rather than religious authority. For youth, secularism enables moral and personal exploration across belief systems, fostering justice, diversity, and mutual respect. However, Secularism is seen as displacing communal values, rituals, and moral frameworks that were once anchored in religion. Nelson Shang defines secularism as "an ideology that advocates the eradication of religious influences in political, social, and educational institutions..."<sup>2</sup> Secularism emphasizes separation between the religious and political spheres.

Secularism, in the context of youth and the New Evangelization, reflects a cultural shift where religious belief is increasingly marginalized from public life and personal identity. Among young people, this often appears as indifferentism and a preference for values rooted in materialism, individualism, and relativism, impacting their sense of morality, purpose, and community. Theologically, secularism poses a challenge to the Church's mission by rendering religious truths seemingly irrelevant. As Pope John Paul II noted in *Ecclesia in Africa*, "A serious deepening of the faith is thus urgently needed, because the rapid evolution of society has given rise to new challenges linked to the phenomena notably of family uprooting, urbanization, unemployment, materialistic seductions of all kinds, a certain secularization ..."<sup>3</sup> The New Evangelization seeks to address this crisis through renewed Gospel proclamation that engages youth relationally and existentially, presenting Christ as the answer to their deepest questions.

<sup>1</sup> William L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980), 519.

<sup>2</sup> Nelson Shang, "The Reality of Secularism in Africa and its Effects on some African Cultural Values" in *Philosophy in Culture: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (eds.), Mbi Jerome Tosam & Petar Petrov Takov (Langaa Research Publishing CIG, Bamenda, 2016), 165-190.

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, On the Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000 (September 14, 1995): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 85 (1996), 5-82, no. 76.

### 1.1. Cause of Secularism among the youth

The growing trend of secularism among youth is not an isolated phenomenon—it is deeply rooted in various cultural, social, and philosophical developments shaping contemporary society. Understanding the causes behind this shift is crucial to addressing its moral and spiritual implications. The following discussion explores the primary factors that have contributed to the rise of secular attitudes and the declining influence of religion in the lives of young people.

#### 1.1.1. Materialism

Materialism is a major challenge in the 21st century, especially among youth. It shapes desires around wealth, possessions, and status, often at the cost of spiritual and ethical values. Klinger Rimiru describes materialism as “an ideology that asserts that, every reality that exists is material... there is no God, no soul, no spiritual reality, but only mater exists.”<sup>4</sup> This outlook fuels secularism, where the pursuit of material gain replaces moral reflection and spiritual depth. Influences like unemployment, nepotism, peer pressure, and media deepen this shift. A report from the Kenya Community Support Centre notes, “... many educated and deserving individuals face challenges in securing employment due to nepotism within both public and private sectors,”<sup>5</sup> driving youth toward wealth as validation.

Traditional African values emphasized community, as John Mbiti once said, “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”<sup>6</sup> Today, individualism driven by materialism is replacing this outlook. Social media and peer dynamics elevate luxury and consumption as measures of success. As Peter Ochieng Okumu observes, “God and religion are realities which are normally not part of their lives... sought only as the last refuge.”<sup>7</sup> Many youths prioritize financial success, turning to religion only when all else fails. This shift reveals how materialism directly fosters secular attitudes, shaping a generation more aligned with worldly success than spiritual grounding.

#### 1.1.2. Poverty

Poverty plays a significant role in the rise of secularism among youth, especially in societies where economic hardship undermines traditional religious engagement. Constance Bansikiza defines poverty as “lack of the basic needs of livelihood.”<sup>8</sup> When youth face hunger, unemployment, and limited access to education, religious practices may seem less relevant to their immediate struggles. The experience goes beyond material deprivation; it terminates the very essence of hope and human dignity. This disillusionment leads many young people to a state of emotional and loss of spiritual conviction, where dreams wither and purpose fades. Jonathan Sacks captures this despair strongly when he describes poverty as “a kind of death” and “worse than 50 plagues.”<sup>9</sup> This conveys the profound erosion of hope and dignity. In such conditions, the absence of opportunity feels like the loss of a future, stripping life of its meaning and reducing faith to a distant memory.

Poverty is a “kind of death,” silencing dreams of many young people in the contemporary society. As economic despair deepens, the secular mindset gains ground, not because youth reject faith outright, but because they struggle to see how it speaks to their lived reality. In this way, poverty becomes a quiet force behind spiritual drift, dimming the light of hope and reshaping moral landscapes. This dire reality reveals how economic instability not only threatens physical well-being but also erodes hope, dignity, and opportunities for a meaningful future. Beyond material deprivation, poverty creates insecurity, social exclusion, and moral uncertainty. Youth in Kilifi Deanery face significant socio-economic challenges, including unemployment, limited access to education, and resource constraints, which perpetuate cycles of poverty.

#### 1.1.3. Globalization

Globalization is undeniably a significant and enduring aspect of our modern world and the way to go. We cannot go forward by going backward. Sandu Culterela define globalization as “intensification of social relations throughout the world, linking distant localities in such a way that local happenings are formed as a

<sup>4</sup> Klinger Rimiru, *Philosophy, Science and God: Introduction to Theodicy* (Nairobi: Consolata Institute of Philosophy Press, 2000), 118.

<sup>5</sup> Kenya Community Support Centre, “Kilifi County Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism -2022,” retrieved from <https://kecosce.org/kilifi-county-action-plan-for-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism/> (accessed 04/08/2025).

<sup>6</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 2nd Edition (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 108-109.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Ochieng’ Okumu, “Secularism: A Pastoral Challenge among the Contemporary African Youth,” retrieved from <https://repository.tangaza.ac.ke/items/2d649af4-71f7-4b38-93b9-2b336f8e0db6> (accessed 10/07/2025).

<sup>8</sup> Constance Bansikiza, *Responding to Poverty in Africa* (Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 2007), 18.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: MPG Books Ltd, 2003), 97.

result of events that occur many miles away and vice versa.”<sup>10</sup> This interconnectedness has reshaped how youth engage with culture, belief systems, and identity. Jennifer Gidley warns that globalization has become “a form of western ethnocentrism, patronizing cultural imperialism,”<sup>11</sup> while Mike Strauss argues that, globalization “creates a hierarchy of cultures displacing traditional values.”<sup>12</sup> Clifford Sibani describes culture as “the totality of life, all the unique characteristics of how people live, believe and interact with each other and with their environment.”<sup>13</sup> As global norms permeate daily life, young people frequently navigate conflicting values. African cultures are now increasingly influenced by secular global norms that challenge spiritual and communal foundations.

Jonathan Sacks describes globalization as “a double-edged sword,” on one hand, it brings us closer together than ever before, interweaving our lives across, nationally and globally, in complex and inextricable ways. On the other hand, globalization is a new tribalism, a regression to older and more fractious loyalties, driving us ever more angrily apart.”<sup>14</sup> In this hyper-connected world, while globalization enables broad, distant connections, it often leads to neglect of immediate, local relationships. We find ourselves linked yet isolated, together yet unavailable. Globalization has reshaped socio-economic conditions for youth. It opens doors to education and jobs but also weakens African cultural values. Traditional beliefs and customs face pressure from global norms, leading to shifts in identity and lifestyle.

#### 1.1.4. Unemployment

Unemployment has become a major contributor to secularism among youth, especially in regions facing economic instability. When young people struggle to find meaningful work, they often lose faith in traditional institutions including religious ones that once offered hope and moral guidance. According to Coretta Munyao’s study on youth unemployment in Kenya, “many educated individuals face barriers such as nepotism and limited job opportunities, leading to frustration and disillusionment.”<sup>15</sup> As youth struggle to find work, they often shift focus from spiritual values to material survival, distancing themselves from religious engagement. This economic exclusion fosters skepticism toward religious teachings that emphasize patience and divine provision.

Peter Ochieng Okumu observes, “God and religion are realities which are normally not part of their lives... sought only as the last refuge.”<sup>16</sup> In this context, religion becomes secondary—consulted only when all other options fail. The rise of secularism among unemployed youth is not just ideological; it reflects a response to systemic barriers and unmet expectations, where faith is replaced by self-reliance and the pursuit of tangible success.

### 1.2. Impact of Secularism on the moral life of the Youth

In an era marked by rapid globalization and cultural transformation, secularism has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary society. While it promises freedom of thought and pluralism, it also raises pressing questions about the moral compass guiding younger generations. Youth, navigating the turbulence of identity formation, peer influence, and technological connectivity, often finding themselves caught between traditional ethical values and modern secular ideals. This tension invites us to explore whether secularism fosters moral autonomy or erodes the ethical foundations once rooted in religious and cultural heritage.

#### 1.2.1. Moral Relativism

Today’s youth live in a fast-changing world where secularism is reshaping their moral compass. As religion becomes less central in public and private life, many young people adopt a relativistic lifestyle, viewing morality as subjective and context-driven. Rahner and Vorgrimler define moral relativism as “the idea that

<sup>10</sup> Sandu Culterela, “Globalization: Definition, Processes and Concepts,” *Romanian Statistical Review Supplement* 60, no. 4 (2012): 137–146, 138.

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Gidley, “Globalization and its Impact on Youth,” *Journal of Futures Studies* 6, no. 1 (2001): 89–106.

<sup>12</sup> Mike Strauss, “Difference between Globalization and Imperialism,” retrieved from <https://www.politicsphere.com/difference-between-globalization-and-imperialism/> (accessed 28/06/2025).

<sup>13</sup> Clifford Meesua Sibani, “Impact of Western Culture on Traditional African Societies: Problems and Prospects,” *International Journal of Religion and Human Relations* 10, no. 1 (2018): 56–72.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Coretta Munyao, “Youth Unemployment and Its Implications on Development in Africa: A case Study of Kenya,” retrieved from <https://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/108932/CORETTA%20DISSERTATION.pdf?sequence=1> (accessed 22/07/2025).

<sup>16</sup> Peter Ochieng Okumu, *Secularism: A Pastoral Challenge Among the Contemporary African Youth* (Master’s thesis, Tangaza College, The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2012); Link <https://repository.tangaza.ac.ke/items/2d649af4-71f7-4b38-93b9-2b336f6e0db6> (accessed 22/07/2025).

moral judgments and values are context-dependent and vary across different individuals or cultures. A belief that decisions about right and wrong are purely personal and subjective.”<sup>17</sup> This shift reflects how young people now navigate competing cultural and ideological influences. Traditional values lose ground to personal interpretations of morality, weakening shared ethical foundations. Carlo Invernizzi Accetti describes moral relativism as:

An invisible gas, odorless, and deadly, that is now polluting every free society on earth. It is a gas that attacks the central nervous system of moral striving. The most perilous threat to the free society today is, therefore, neither political nor economic. It is the poisonous, corrupting culture of relativism. . . . Accetti lists seven evil and destructive effects of relativism: 1) Relativism commits treason against God. 2) Relativism cultivates duplicity. 3) Relativism conceals doctrinal defection. 4) Relativism cloaks greed with flattery. 5) Relativism cloaks pride with the guise of humility. 6) Relativism enslaves people. 7) Relativism leads to brutal totalitarianism.<sup>18</sup>

Accetti’s description portrays moral relativism as a silent yet corrosive force undermining society’s moral core. Among youth today, it replaces absolute truths with personal preferences, leading to ethical confusion and a loss of spiritual direction. As secularism grows, young people increasingly reject fixed moral standards, embracing flexible values shaped by convenience, culture, and peer influence. This shift promotes dishonesty, masks doctrinal decline, and erodes accountability. This perception weakens moral striving and paves the way for authoritarian control. The result is a generation navigating life without clear boundaries, valuing freedom, yet losing the compass that guides responsible and principled living.

### 1.2.2. Decline of Traditional Moral Values

In today’s globalized and secular-driven society, the erosion of traditional moral values among youth is increasingly evident. Moral principles once anchored in religion, community, and family are being replaced by individual autonomy and subjective reasoning. Yog Raj underscores this shift: “Today we are living in a materialistic world where the standard of living has risen but at the same time standard of life is waning unabatedly...”<sup>19</sup> Secularism, while promoting freedom of belief, creates a vacuum where established ethical frameworks struggle to remain relevant. Exposure to diverse global cultures fosters questioning and, as Egbeke Aja notes, “often results in rejecting traditional norms and practice,”<sup>20</sup> weakening moral cohesion.

This reorientation is especially pronounced in African societies where communal values have been central. Influenced by modern education, technology, and foreign lifestyles, youth increasingly embrace individualism over social duty. Collins Alyce warns, “Communal life that was held as core value has been overtaken by individuality... I am concerned that this attitude change will harm society.”<sup>21</sup> Behaviors like drug use, disregard for elders, and self-centered choices reflect a departure from virtue-based ethics, replacing moral standards with personal comfort. Secularism’s role in this transformation challenges the continuity of cultural and moral heritage, risking long-term societal disintegration.

### 1.2.3. Breakup of Family and Community Bonds

In contemporary society, secularism increasingly champions personal autonomy and rational inquiry, encouraging youth to define their identities outside traditional religious and cultural frameworks. This paradigm shift often weakens long-standing communal structures and erodes shared values that once anchored family cohesion. As Fancy Cheronoh observes, “In the traditional extended families, mutual interpersonal relationships, solidarity, strong sense of belonging were highly encouraged.”<sup>22</sup> However, youth disengagement from religious institutions and belief systems has led to diminished respect for elders, loss of mentorship, and fewer moral role models. The erosion of shared belief systems contributes to strained intergenerational relationships and reduces the familial bond as a core unit of socialization.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Rahner & Herbert Vorgrimler, *Concise Theological Dictionary Second Edition* (London: Herders, 1981), 436.

<sup>18</sup> Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, *Relativism and Religion: Why Democratic Societies do not Need Moral Absolutes* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2015), 15.

<sup>19</sup> Yog Raj, “Declining Moral Values among Youth: An Emerging Issue,” *National Journal of Environment and Scientific Research* 6, no. 5 (May 2024): 38–46, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Egbeke Aja, “Changing Moral Values in Africa: An Essay in Ethical Relativism,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 31 (1997): 531–543, 531.

<sup>21</sup> Collins Alyce, “It’s Giving Spoilt Brat: Are Gen-Z and Millennials Fuelling a Decline in Traditional Moral Values?” retrieved from <https://themoveee.com/2023/03/27/its-giving-spoilt-brat-are-gen-z-and-millennials-fuelling-a-decline-in-traditional-moral-values/> (accessed 20/07/2025).

<sup>22</sup> Nancy Cheronoh, “Restoring the African Family: Inculturational Approach to Contemporary Family and Parenting Difficulties,” *Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* 24, no. 5 (2019): 36-41, 36.



Beyond the family, secularism significantly alters how youth engage with their broader communities. Juma Mwamba emphasizes that, “In Africa where traditions of togetherness and collective responsibility run deep, the youth are not just the leaders of tomorrow; they are leaders today. Their energy, creativity, and resilience offer hope for building stronger, and more inclusive communities.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, this leadership potential is challenged by the decline of communal activities such as traditional rites of passage, and other neighborhood meetings, all of which historically cultivated unity and communal responsibility. As secular ideologies gain prominence, participation in these rituals wanes, limiting communal dialogue and mutual support. For many youth, this erosion fosters social isolation and weakens their sense of belonging, particularly in urban and digitally mediated environments where individualism prevails. These effects, cumulatively, threaten the cultural and spiritual anchors that once defined collective identity.

### 1.3. The Moral Theological Considerations on Secularism

Secularism, driven by the elevation of human autonomy and empirical reasoning, often sidelines religious moral frameworks and transcendent truths. This presents a theological challenge: how can moral theology remain credible and compelling amid such shifts? A meaningful response must be rooted in Scripture, shaped by Church tradition, and enriched by African ethical thought, each offering enduring wisdom to confront moral fragmentation and reassert the dignity of divine-guided human life.

#### 1.3.1. Biblical Understanding of Secularism

The Bible consistently cautions against the seduction of secular ideologies that reject divine authority, urging believers to anchor their identity and moral discernment in God. Romans 12:2 reinforces: “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*” This highlights the imperative of spiritual resistance to secular conformity as Bruce Vawter writes: “Jesus is the spiritual nourishment that sustains eternal life, contrasting temporary satisfaction with divine provision. Jesus brings truth and guidance, dispelling darkness as He says ‘I am the light of the world’ (John 8:12). Jesus is the light that both gives life and is life, the life of those of those who cannot walk in darkness.”<sup>24</sup> This image speaks directly to youth grappling with secular influences, offering a stark contrast between fleeting materialism and lasting spiritual truth. Vawter’s reflection is a theological call to rediscover purpose in Christ, whose light dispels moral ambiguity and leads believers toward enduring clarity and life-giving truth.

Secularism, often characterized by moral relativism and human-centered ethics, presents significant challenges to Christian faith among youth, including diminished reverence for divine truth and increased reliance on personal autonomy. Proverbs 1:7 offers a counter-foundation: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” This affirms that true wisdom and morality originate from divine revelation, not subjective reasoning. In a cultural landscape dominated by individualism and shifting values, the biblical message centers spiritual discernment on God’s character, urging youth to move beyond self-made ideologies toward a transformative relationship with Christ. Through scripture, the Christian faith offers a coherent moral compass and existential meaning in a world often clouded by secular alternatives.

#### 1.3.2. Church Tradition on Secularism

The Church has long confronted the challenge of secularism, especially its impact on youth and the erosion of spiritual identity. In response, it draws on a rich tradition of theological reflection and pastoral engagement to bridge the gap between faith and modern culture. This section focuses on the contributions of Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI. Each offer distinct perspectives on secularism, calling for a renewed encounter with Christ and proposing pathways for spiritual renewal that meet contemporary realities with clarity, compassion, and conviction.

##### 1.3.2.1. John Paul II on Secularism among the Youth

John Paul II recognized the rising tide of secularism among youth as a crisis of identity and purpose, urging them to rediscover their roots in Christ and their mission within the Church. In *Dilecti Amici* (1985), he addressed the challenges of cultural dislocation and moral confusion, writing: “Young people ... I desire therefore to entrust to all of you, young people to whom this marvelous task which is linked with the discovery before God of each one’s life vocation.... You become rooted in that which each of you is, in order to become

<sup>23</sup> Juma Mwamba, “The Role of Youth in Strengthening Community Bonds in Africa,” retrieved from <https://theafricanhumanistjournal.com/the-role-of-youth-in-strengthening-community-bonds-in-africa/> (accessed 24/07/2025).

<sup>24</sup> Bruce Vawter, “The Gospel According to John,” in *The Old Testament, The New Testament and Topical Articles: The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (eds.), Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer & Roland E. Murphy (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986), 404-466, 441.

that which you must become: for yourself- for other people-for God...”<sup>25</sup> He consistently emphasized their central role in shaping the future, declaring: “The future is in your hearts and in your hands. God is entrusting to you the task, at once difficult and uplifting, of working with him in the building of the civilization of love.”<sup>26</sup> In the face of secularism, Pope’s message calls young people to counter cultural detachment by actively shaping a future rooted in faith, love, and moral responsibility.

Pope John Paul II championed a harmonious integration of faith and reason, affirming that “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.”<sup>27</sup> In an era where secularism often elevates reason while dismissing faith, he urged youth to embrace both as vital to understanding life’s deeper truths. Faith, he emphasized, provides moral guidance and spiritual depth, a foundation cultivated through prayer and Scripture. He exhorted: “Pray and learn to pray! Open your hearts and your consciences to the one who knows you better than you know yourselves. Talk to him! Deepen your knowledge of the word of the Living God by reading and meditating on the Scriptures.”<sup>28</sup> Through these practices, young people strengthen their inner lives and form resilient convictions, enabling them to navigate modern complexities with clarity, purpose, and a renewed vision for truth and love, rooted in God.

### 1.3.2.2. Pope Benedict XVI on Secularism

Pope Benedict XVI addressed secularism among youth as a crisis of truth and meaning rooted in moral relativism. In his 2005 conclave homily, warned against the “dictatorship of relativism,” a concept that challenges the existence of absolute truths and promote the idea that moral values are subjective...”<sup>29</sup> This notion rejects absolute truths and elevates personal desires above enduring moral values. He cautioned: “Today, having a clear faith based on the creed of the Church is often labeled fundamentalism. Whereas relativism... seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times.”<sup>30</sup> Benedict argued that such relativism erodes moral clarity and leaves young people without stable principles to guide their lives, replacing conviction with conformity to passing trends.

In his 2011 World Youth Day message, Benedict XVI continued this critique, highlighting that relativistic ideologies “do not lead to true freedom, but rather to instability, confusion and blind conformity to the fads of the moment.”<sup>31</sup> He called youth to rediscover truth through a transformative encounter with Christ. To have faith not just as doctrine, but as a personal relationship that anchors life in purpose and dignity. He cautioned that, “We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely in satisfying one’s ego and desires, resulting in a loss of moral clarity.”<sup>32</sup> His concern reflects a broader ecclesial response to the erosion of ethical foundations and the need to reaffirm universal moral principles rooted in faith and reason in the face of secular pressures.

### 1.3.2.3. Pope Francis and the Youth’s Response to Secularism

Pope Francis has consistently emphasized the need to engage young people in meaningful dialogue about faith in an increasingly secular world. In his apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*, he acknowledges the challenges posed by secularism, which often marginalizes religious belief and reduces faith to a private affair. He calls for renewed evangelization that meets youth where they are, recognizing their desire for authenticity, community, and purpose. As he writes, “Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world.”<sup>33</sup> Scholars such as Rossano Sala argue that “youth ministry must be synodal, rooted in listening, accompaniment, and shared mission to counteract the alienation many young people feel in secular societies.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>25</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dilecti Amici*, To the Youth of the World on the Occasion of International Youth Year (March 31, 1985): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 4 (1985), 881–899, no. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Gillian Weyant, “John Paul II’s Enduring Legacy of Faith in a Secular Age,” <https://www.coraevans.com/blog/article/john-paul-iis-enduring-legacy-of-faith-in-a-secular-age> (accessed 25/07/2025).

<sup>27</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, On the Relationship Between Faith and Reason (14 September 1998): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 91 (7 January 1999), 5–88, no. 1.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dilecti Amici*, no. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Benedict XVI, “The Dictatorship of Relativism: A Conversation with Peter Seewald,” retrieved from <https://lst.edu/articles/the-dictatorship-of-relativism-pope-benedict-xvi/> (accessed 26/07/2025).

<sup>30</sup> Benedict XVI, “Mass, Homily of His Eminence Card. Joseph Ratzinger Dean of the College of Cardinals,” retrieved from [https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice\\_20050418\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html) (accessed 26/07/2025).

<sup>31</sup> Benedict XVI, Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the Twenty-Sixth World Youth Day (August 30, 2011): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 8 (2011), 513–520, no. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Benedict XVI, “Mass, Homily of His Eminence Card. Joseph Ratzinger Dean of the College of Cardinals,” retrieved from [https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice\\_20050418\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html) (accessed 26/07/2025).

<sup>33</sup> Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God (March 25, 2019): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 4 (2019), 391–476, no. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Rossano Sala, “Youth Ministry after the Synod on Young People, Ten Points of No Return,” *Religions* 11, no. 6 (2020): 1–15.

This approach reflects Pope Francis' broader vision of a Church that walks with young people, fostering a spirituality that is both personal and socially engaged.

Moreover, Pope Francis views secularism not only as a challenge but also as an opportunity for the Church to purify and renew its mission. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he critiques the "growing deterioration of ethics"<sup>35</sup> and relativism that secularism can bring, while affirming the value of dialogue with secular culture to rediscover the transcendent. Piotr Musiewicz highlights how Francis' vision includes ecclesiastical institutions such as universities as "key players in responding to secularization through intellectual and spiritual formation."<sup>36</sup> By encouraging youth to engage critically with their faith and the world around them, Pope Francis promotes a dynamic response to secularism that is rooted in hope, discernment, and communal witness.

### 1.3.3. The Perspectives of African Moral Theologians on Youth and Secularism

In present-day African societies, secularism among the youth poses a growing challenge, prompting African theologians to respond with ethical frameworks rooted in tradition and faith. They argue that secularism conflicts with core African values such as communalism, Ubuntu, and reverence for life. This section highlights the contributions of John Mbiti, Bénédét Bujo, and Cardinal Robert Sarah, who defend objective morality through both theological insight and cultural heritage. Their perspectives offer meaningful responses to the moral confusion affecting youth and society across the continent.

#### 1.3.3.1. John Mbiti on Crisis of Religious Identity

In his influential work *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti defines African philosophy as "a systematic study of the attitudes of mind and belief which have evolved in the many societies of Africa,"<sup>37</sup> emphasizing the shared spiritual and moral frameworks across diverse cultures on the continent. Mbiti contends that the crisis of religious identity in Africa stems from the erosion of traditional communal values under the pressures of modernization and secularism. He defines African philosophy as a unified system of beliefs that emphasize relational personhood: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."<sup>38</sup> In this framework, morality arises not from individual autonomy but from mutual responsibility and shared existence. John Mbiti famously asserted:

Africans are notoriously religious. An individual is born religiously in a religious setting and grew up as a religious person able to distinguish between what is sacred and secular. So, religion permeated the entire department of human life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony: if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university, if he is a politician, he take it to the house of parliament.<sup>39</sup>

John Mbiti's portrayal of African spirituality underscores its holistic nature, where religion permeates all aspects of life and shapes ethical norms, interpersonal relationships, and communal responsibilities. Moral decisions, in this framework, are grounded in ancestral wisdom and collective identity rather than individual autonomy. However, Mbiti cautions that modernization, urbanization, Western ideologies, and media influence have eroded this deep religiosity, especially among the youth. This shift, he argues, threatens the moral and spiritual foundations of African societies and may result in ethical disorientation. His insights remain pivotal in understanding the growing tension between traditional African spirituality and modern secularism.

#### 1.3.3.2. Bénédét Bujo: Reclaiming African Ethical Consciousness

Bénédét Bujo responds to rising secularism among African youth by rooting his theology in the communal values of ubuntu and palaver, which emphasize dialogue, relational ethics, and collective identity. He critiques Western moral frameworks for promoting individualism, which he views as incompatible with African personhood. In *African Theology in Its Social Context*, Bujo calls for a theology that resonates with the lived experiences of Africans, especially the youth: "African theology must engage with the real-life experiences of African people especially the youth by affirming their cultural identity and addressing contemporary social challenges such as poverty, urbanization, and moral disorientation."<sup>40</sup> This is echoed by Paulinus Odozor: "We

<sup>35</sup> Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (November 24, 2013): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 105 (2013), 1019-1137, no. 64.

<sup>36</sup> Piotr Musiewicz, "Secularization, the New Phase of Evangelization and Pope Francis' Idea of an Ecclesiastical University," *Roczniki Teologiczne* 70, no. 1 (2023): 7-25.

<sup>37</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), Front Cover.

<sup>38</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108-109.

<sup>39</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1 & 2.

<sup>40</sup> Bénédét Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 130.

all speak from our various cultural caves as we open our mouths to theologize with God speaking to people in their various contexts of life,”<sup>41</sup> reinforcing the idea that morality is culturally and contextually grounded.

Bénézet Bujo argues that African personhood is intrinsically communal, where identity and freedom emerge through relational bonds: “I am a relative therefore I exist, or better expressed, therefore we exist.”<sup>42</sup> He emphasizes that identity and freedom are realized only within the context of community: “Only together with others can one become a human person and achieve individual freedom, which again should be exercised in a communitarian manner.”<sup>43</sup> Bujo links ethical discernment with communal accountability, stressing that, “The decision or behaviour of one member impacts on all... discernment of the spirit must be preserved even in the context of friendship.”<sup>44</sup> This underscores the moral weight of individual choices and their impact on collective well-being. As quoted by SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai, Bujo calls for a theology that reflects “the commonality that defines the Black world and the need for African theology to embody African existential experiences.”<sup>45</sup> Secularism emerging among African youth results from theological models that fail to resonate with their lived cultural realities, thus necessitating a contextual approach that reclaims relevance and belonging.

#### 1.4. Toward a Contextualized Moral Response to Youth Secularism

A contextualized moral response to secularism among African youth requires theological engagement that reflects cultural diversity, generational shifts, and spiritual disconnection. Rooted in postmodern ideals of autonomy and relativism, secularism challenges traditional moral foundations and cannot be countered by doctrine alone. The effort demands experiential dialogue which advocates for a reimagined evangelization that speaks not merely from the pulpit, but from within the rhythms of youth culture, digital media, and communal life, fostering moral resilience and spiritually grounded identity. This includes: *first*, engaging youth in critical dialogue that affirms their search for meaning while fostering ethical reflection rooted in Christian values and African philosophical traditions; *second*, revitalizing catechesis by integrating indigenous wisdom, contemporary social issues, and culturally attuned theological methods; *third*, promoting ethical literacy and moral resilience through education grounded in communal ethics and spiritual mentorship; *fourth*, expanding digital evangelization strategies to deliver compelling moral narratives in formats familiar to youth; *fifth*, empowering young people as co-creators of moral culture through active leadership and theological participation; and *sixth*, strengthening pastoral accompaniment to provide relational support and holistic faith formation. Together, these approaches form a coherent framework for addressing secularism with cultural relevance, theological depth, and pastoral effectiveness.

#### Conclusion

The growing secular consciousness among youth demands a morally grounded and culturally resonant theological response, one that neither dismisses their lived realities nor compromises the integrity of faith. By affirming the dignity of communal values and spiritually informed ethics, the Church can reorient young people toward a moral vision that upholds both relational identity and transcendent purpose. Ultimately, engaging youth requires more than doctrinal instructions. It calls for a theology that speaks their language, addresses their challenges, and accompanies them in the search for meaning. Reclaiming moral clarity in a secular age begins with reimagining theology as a living dialogue rooted in relevance, integrity, and hope.

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<sup>41</sup> Paulinus I. Odozor, “From Theology in Africa to African Theology, Impact of the Council on New Generation African Theologians,” in *Celebrating 50 Years of Vatican II: Challenges/Contributions of African Church* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 2012), 1-28, 11.

<sup>42</sup> Bénézet Bujo, *Plea for Change of Models for Marriage* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2009), 21.

<sup>43</sup> Bénézet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of the Community: The African Model and the Dialogue Between North and South* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 1998), 148.

<sup>44</sup> Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa 2003), 118-119.

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