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Influence of Secularization on the Behaviour of Youth in Holy Family Basilica, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya

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***Abstract*: This study examined the influence of secularization on the behaviour of youth at the Holy Family Basilica, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya. The study was motivated by growing concerns regarding the changing moral attitudes, religious commitment, and behavioural patterns among young people in an increasingly modern and technologically driven society. Guided by Modern Secularization Theory and Social Cognitive Theory, the research adopted a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative techniques to collect and analyze data from youth, church leaders, and other key informants within the Basilica. The findings revealed that secularization significantly influences youth behaviour through factors such as social media, urbanization, education, globalization, and peer pressure. These influences have contributed to changing attitudes towards church participation, moral values, personal relationships, and religious authority. The study further established that while many young people continue to identify with the Catholic faith, they often experience tension between Christian teachings and contemporary societal values. Despite these challenges, religion remains an important source of moral guidance, identity, and spiritual support among the youth. The study concludes that secularization has not eliminated religious commitment among young people but has transformed the environment within which faith is practiced and understood. It recommends strengthening youth formation programs, enhancing digital evangelization, promoting family-based faith formation, and developing contextual pastoral strategies that respond effectively to contemporary social realities. Such interventions can help the Church nurture morally responsible and spiritually grounded youth in an increasingly secularized society.**

***Keywords*: Secularization, Youth Behaviour, Catholic Church, Social Media, Holy Family Basilica.**

1. Introduction

The place of religion in contemporary society continues to generate significant scholarly debate, particularly in relation to the growing influence of secularization on social values and moral behaviour. Secularization refers to the process through which religious beliefs, institutions, and practices lose their influence in shaping public and private life. As societies become increasingly modernized, urbanized, and technologically advanced, individuals tend to rely more on rational, scientific, and personal approaches to decision-making than on religious teachings. This development has profound implications for the moral formation of young people, especially within religious communities.

Among Christian youth, secularization has increasingly manifested itself through changing attitudes towards faith, morality, church participation, and traditional religious authority. The youth are exposed to multiple sources of influence, including social media, peer groups, globalization, popular culture, and educational systems that often promote values different from those traditionally upheld by religious institutions. Consequently, religious teachings are no longer the sole reference point for moral decision-making among many young people.

The Catholic Church has consistently emphasized the importance of moral formation among youth. Through Sacred Scripture, Church Tradition, and the Magisterium, the Church seeks to guide young people towards responsible moral living rooted in Christian values. However, contemporary realities indicate that many young people increasingly adopt individualistic perspectives that prioritize personal autonomy over religious authority. This shift raises important concerns regarding the influence of secularization on youth behaviour and the effectiveness of existing pastoral approaches in nurturing faith and morality.

The Holy Family Basilica, situated in the Archdiocese of Nairobi, provides a suitable context for examining these concerns. As one of the largest Catholic parishes in Kenya, the Basilica serves thousands of young people from diverse educational, social, and economic backgrounds. The parish therefore presents a valuable opportunity to investigate how secularization influences youth behaviour and how the Church can respond effectively to emerging moral and spiritual challenges.

2. Background to the Study

The concept of secularization has evolved significantly over time and remains one of the most discussed themes within sociology, philosophy, and religious studies. Early proponents of secularization theory argued that modernization would gradually reduce the social significance of religion. Thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim

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associated modernization with scientific advancement, rational thinking, urbanization, and individualism, all of which were expected to diminish the influence of religious institutions.

In contemporary society, secularization is often understood as the gradual movement away from religious authority towards human-centered approaches to life. Rather than relying on religious teachings for guidance, individuals increasingly base their decisions on personal preferences, scientific reasoning, social trends, and cultural influences. This shift has been particularly noticeable among younger generations who have grown up in highly interconnected digital environments.

Globally, studies indicate that young people are increasingly distancing themselves from organized religion. Research conducted in North America and Europe has documented declining religious affiliation, reduced church attendance, and changing attitudes towards traditional moral teachings. Many young adults now identify as religiously unaffiliated while continuing to maintain personal spiritual beliefs. This trend has led scholars to question whether secularization necessarily results in moral decline or whether it simply transforms the ways in which individuals understand and express morality.

In Africa, the influence of secularization presents a more complex picture. Although religion continues to play a significant role in public and private life, globalization, urbanization, higher education, technological advancement, and social media have introduced new value systems that increasingly shape the behaviour of young people. African youth today navigate multiple worlds simultaneously, balancing traditional religious expectations with modern social realities. Consequently, tensions often emerge between religious teachings and contemporary cultural influences.

Within the Kenyan context, concerns regarding the moral behaviour of youth have become increasingly prominent. Religious leaders, educators, parents, and policymakers have expressed concern over issues such as declining church participation, inappropriate dressing, substance abuse, sexual permissiveness, weakening family values, and growing individualism. These concerns have often been linked to the expanding influence of secular values within society.

The Catholic Church in Kenya has consistently emphasized the need for moral and spiritual formation among young people. Church leaders have called for renewed efforts in catechesis, mentorship, youth ministry, and faith formation programs aimed at strengthening Christian values among the younger generation. Nevertheless, the rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media platforms continues to expose youth to competing ideologies and alternative moral frameworks.

At the Holy Family Basilica, these challenges are increasingly evident. Youth encounter diverse influences that shape their attitudes towards faith, morality, relationships, and personal identity. While many remain actively involved in Church activities, others demonstrate varying degrees of disengagement from traditional Catholic teachings and practices. The coexistence of strong religious affiliation alongside growing secular influences creates a complex environment that warrants scholarly investigation.

This study therefore examines the influence of secularization on the behaviour of youth at the Holy Family Basilica in the Archdiocese of Nairobi. It seeks to understand the features of secularization evident among youth, assess its impact on moral behaviour, explore youth responses to Church teachings, and identify strategies that can strengthen Christian moral formation within an increasingly secularized environment.

3. Statement of the Problem

Secularization has become one of the most significant social phenomena influencing contemporary societies. Advances in technology, urbanization, globalization, formal education, and digital communication have transformed the way individuals perceive religion, morality, and social values. Among young people, these developments have created alternative sources of meaning and identity that often compete with traditional religious teachings and practices.

Within the Catholic Church, youth are expected to embrace Christian values and moral principles as the foundation of their personal and social lives. However, increasing exposure to social media, popular culture, peer influence, and secular ideologies has contributed to changing attitudes towards religion and morality. In many urban contexts, including Nairobi, young people are increasingly making decisions based on personal preferences and contemporary societal trends rather than on the teachings of the Church. Consequently, concerns have emerged regarding declining religious commitment, reduced participation in church activities, weakening adherence to Christian moral values, and the adoption of behaviours that may conflict with Church teachings.

Although secularization has been extensively studied in Western societies, limited empirical research has examined its influence on the behaviour of Catholic youth within the Kenyan context. This gap is particularly evident in studies focusing on urban Catholic parishes where young people are exposed to diverse social, cultural, and technological influences. The Holy Family Basilica, as one of the largest Catholic parishes in Kenya, provides an important setting for examining this phenomenon. Understanding how secularization influences the behaviour of youth within this context is essential for developing effective pastoral and faith formation strategies that can strengthen Christian values among young people.

This study therefore sought to examine the influence of secularization on the behaviour of youth at the Holy Family Basilica, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya.

4. Research Question

How does secularization influence the behaviour of youth at the Holy Family Basilica, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya?

5. Literature Review

A. Theoretical Perspective

This study was guided by the Modern Secularization Theory and the Social Cognitive Theory. The two theories complement each other in explaining how secularization influences youth behaviour in contemporary society.

Modern Secularization Theory, associated with scholars such as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Bryan Wilson, argues that modernization, urbanization, scientific advancement, and globalization gradually reduce the influence of religion on society and individual life. As societies become more modern, people increasingly rely on reason, science, and personal judgment rather than religious authority. The theory is relevant to this study because it explains how social media, education, and globalization expose youth to alternative worldviews that may challenge traditional Christian values. However, critics argue that the theory overemphasizes the decline of religion since religious beliefs remain vibrant in many African societies.

Social Cognitive Theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1986), explains that behaviour is learned through interaction between personal factors, environmental influences, and experiences. Individuals acquire attitudes and behaviours by observing role models and responding to their social environment. The theory is relevant to this study because it demonstrates how youth learn values and behaviours from peers, parents, religious leaders, celebrities, and social media influencers. It therefore helps explain how secular values are transmitted and adopted among young people.

Together, the two theories provide a useful framework for understanding both the societal forces that promote secularization and the social processes through which youth behaviour is shaped.

1) Empirical Literature

Secularization has attracted considerable scholarly attention because of its influence on religion, morality, and youth behaviour. Scholars generally describe secularization as the process through which religious beliefs and institutions lose their influence in shaping social life. Studies in Europe and North America indicate declining religious participation among young people, accompanied by increasing individualism and reliance on personal judgment in moral decision-making.

In Africa, the effects of secularization are more complex because religion continues to play a significant role in society. Nevertheless, modernization, urbanization, globalization, and technological advancement have introduced new influences that affect youth values and behaviour. Young people increasingly navigate between traditional religious expectations and contemporary secular lifestyles.

Research identifies social media as one of the most influential agents of secularization. Digital platforms expose youth to diverse perspectives on morality, relationships, identity, and religion, often challenging established religious teachings. Education and peer influence have also been found to shape attitudes towards faith and morality by encouraging critical thinking, independence, and social conformity.

The Catholic Church continues to promote moral and spiritual formation through catechesis, youth ministry, mentorship, and sacramental life. However, studies show that many young people experience tension between Church teachings and contemporary social realities, leading some to selectively embrace religious values while adopting secular perspectives in other areas of life.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that secularization is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by social, cultural, technological, and educational factors. While religion remains important in many African societies, secular influences continue to affect the attitudes and behaviour of young people. This study contributes to existing scholarship by examining how these influences shape the behaviour of youth at the Holy Family Basilica, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya.

6. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the influence of secularization on the behaviour of youth at the Holy Family Basilica, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya. The mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the collection of both numerical data and detailed personal experiences, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings through methodological triangulation.

The study was conducted at the Holy Family Basilica, the mother church of the Archdiocese of Nairobi. The Basilica serves a diverse population of Catholic faithful, including a significant number of young people drawn from different educational, social, and economic backgrounds. The youth population provided a suitable context for examining the influence of secularization within an urban Catholic setting.

The target population comprised youth actively participating in church activities, youth leaders, catechists, and clergy members involved in youth ministry. These categories of respondents were considered important because they possessed direct experience and knowledge regarding the religious, moral, and social challenges facing young people in contemporary society.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and observation guides. Questionnaires generated quantitative data on youth perceptions, attitudes, and behavioural patterns associated with secularization. Semi-structured interviews provided qualitative insights into the experiences and views of youth leaders, clergy, and selected young people. Observation guides were used to capture behavioural patterns, participation in church activities, and interactions within the parish environment.

A combination of purposive and simple random sampling techniques was employed. Purposive sampling facilitated the selection of key informants who possessed specialized knowledge regarding youth ministry and faith formation. Simple random sampling ensured that every member of the target youth population had an equal opportunity of participating in the study, thereby minimizing sampling bias.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequencies, percentages, and tables were used to summarize and present the findings. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and observations were analyzed thematically. Emerging themes were identified, categorized, and interpreted in relation to the objectives of the study and the theoretical framework.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the

research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation was sought through informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by ensuring that respondents' identities were not disclosed. The study further adhered to the ethical guidelines governing research involving human participants.

7. Findings

The findings reveal that secularization has had a notable influence on the behaviour of youth at the Holy Family Basilica. The study established that while many young people continue to identify strongly with the Catholic faith, they are increasingly exposed to secular influences that shape their attitudes, values, and behavioural choices.

One of the major indicators of secularization identified in the study was the growing influence of social media. Respondents reported spending considerable time on digital platforms where they interact with diverse ideas, lifestyles, and cultural values. These platforms often promote individual freedom, self-expression, and personal autonomy, values that sometimes conflict with traditional Christian teachings. Many respondents acknowledged that social media significantly influences their opinions on relationships, morality, dress code, and lifestyle choices.

The study further established that urbanization contributes to the spread of secular values among youth. Living in a cosmopolitan environment exposes young people to people from different cultural, religious, and ideological backgrounds. Such exposure encourages tolerance and openness but may also weaken commitment to specific religious teachings. Respondents indicated that urban lifestyles often prioritize material success, personal achievement, and social status over spiritual growth and religious commitment.

Education emerged as another important factor associated with secularization. Participants noted that exposure to higher education encourages critical thinking and independent decision-making. While education was generally viewed positively, some respondents indicated that it occasionally leads young people to question traditional religious beliefs and practices. Consequently, some youth adopt a more individualized approach to faith, selecting religious teachings that align with their personal preferences while disregarding others.

Peer influence was also identified as a significant determinant of youth behaviour. Respondents reported that friends and social networks play a major role in shaping attitudes towards religion, relationships, and morality. In some cases, peer groups reinforced positive Christian values; however, in other instances, they encouraged behaviours inconsistent with Church teachings. The desire for social acceptance often influenced the choices made by young people.

The findings further revealed that secularization has contributed to declining participation in certain religious activities. Although many respondents continued attending Mass and participating in church programs, some acknowledged that religious commitments often compete with academic responsibilities, entertainment, employment, and social engagements. This has resulted in irregular attendance at some church activities and reduced involvement in faith formation programs.

Regarding moral behaviour, respondents expressed varying views on issues such as sexuality, relationships, dressing, and personal conduct. While the majority recognized the importance of Christian moral teachings, many acknowledged experiencing pressure from contemporary society to adopt values that differ from those promoted by the Church. This tension reflects the growing influence of secular culture on youth decision-making processes.

The study also found that many young people continue to appreciate the role of religion in providing moral guidance, emotional support, and a sense of purpose. Despite the influence of secularization, respondents generally viewed faith as an important aspect of their lives. However, they expressed the need for the Church to adopt more relevant and engaging approaches to youth ministry that address contemporary challenges facing young people.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that secularization influences youth behaviour through multiple channels, including social media, urbanization, education, globalization, and peer interactions. While these influences present challenges to traditional religious values, they also create opportunities for the Church to develop innovative strategies for strengthening faith formation and moral development among young people.

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that secularization exerts a considerable influence on the behaviour of youth at the Holy Family Basilica, Archdiocese of Nairobi. The study established that social media, urbanization, education, peer influence, and globalization are among the primary channels through which secular values are transmitted and internalized by young people. These findings support the argument advanced by Modern Secularization Theory that modernization introduces alternative sources of authority and meaning which gradually compete with traditional religious institutions.

The findings revealed that social media plays a particularly significant role in shaping the attitudes and behaviour of youth. Through continuous exposure to digital content, young people encounter diverse worldviews, moral perspectives, and lifestyle choices that influence their understanding of relationships, sexuality, morality, and personal identity. This observation is consistent with Social Cognitive Theory, which argues that individuals learn behaviour through observation and interaction with their environment. Social media influencers, celebrities, peers, and online communities therefore become important agents of behavioural formation among youth.

The study further established that urbanization contributes to changing attitudes towards religion and morality. The cosmopolitan nature of Nairobi exposes young people to multiple cultural and ideological influences. While such exposure promotes tolerance and broadens perspectives, it may also weaken attachment to traditional religious values. These findings support previous studies that have linked urbanization with increasing individualism and declining dependence on

religious institutions for moral guidance.

Education was also identified as an important factor influencing secularization. The findings suggest that education encourages critical thinking and independent judgment among young people. While this development has positive implications for intellectual growth, it may also lead some youth to question established religious beliefs and practices. This finding does not imply that education undermines faith; rather, it demonstrates the need for religious institutions to engage young people intellectually and provide credible responses to contemporary questions affecting faith and morality.

Peer influence emerged as another significant determinant of youth behaviour. Young people often seek acceptance and belonging within social groups. As a result, peer approval frequently shapes attitudes towards religion, relationships, and personal conduct. This observation strongly supports Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and observational learning in behavioural development. Youth who associate with peers who value religious commitment are more likely to maintain positive religious practices, whereas those exposed to secularized peer groups may adopt behaviours inconsistent with Christian teachings.

The findings also indicate that although secularization presents challenges to religious commitment, it has not completely displaced religious belief among the youth. Most respondents continued to identify themselves as Catholics and acknowledged the importance of religion in providing moral guidance, emotional support, and spiritual direction. This finding challenges the more deterministic interpretations of Modern Secularization Theory which predict the inevitable decline of religion. Instead, the findings suggest that religion remains relevant, although it increasingly competes with alternative sources of influence in shaping youth behaviour.

Furthermore, the study established that many young people experience tension between Church teachings and contemporary social realities. While they generally appreciate Christian values, they often struggle to apply them consistently within environments characterized by competing moral perspectives. This finding corroborates previous studies that have highlighted the growing complexity of moral decision-making among youth in modern societies.

Overall, the findings suggest that secularization should not merely be viewed as a threat to religious life but also as a challenge that calls for renewed pastoral approaches. The Church must recognize the realities confronting contemporary youth and develop strategies that effectively integrate faith with the social, cultural, and technological environments in which young people live.

9. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, several recommendations are proposed.

The Catholic Church should strengthen youth formation programs that address contemporary challenges associated with secularization. Such programs should focus on moral development, Christian identity, digital literacy, and responsible decision-making.

Church leaders should embrace modern communication technologies and social media platforms as tools for evangelization and faith formation. By establishing a meaningful presence in digital spaces, the Church can engage young people within environments where they spend a significant portion of their time.

Parents and guardians should play a more active role in nurturing Christian values within families. Family prayer, open communication, positive role modelling, and religious instruction remain important foundations for moral development among youth.

Educational institutions should continue promoting value-based education that integrates academic excellence with ethical and moral formation. Schools can contribute significantly to helping young people develop responsible citizenship and moral discernment.

Youth ministries should adopt participatory approaches that encourage active involvement, mentorship, leadership development, and peer support. Programs that allow young people to discuss contemporary issues openly are likely to be more effective in addressing challenges associated with secularization.

The Church should further strengthen collaboration with families, schools, and community organizations in promoting holistic youth development. Such partnerships can provide a supportive environment that reinforces positive values and responsible behaviour.

Finally, further research should be conducted in other dioceses and denominations to examine the broader impact of secularization on youth behaviour within Kenya and across Africa. Comparative studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and inform more effective pastoral responses.

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