

Berger, Peter L.

The Many Altars of Modernity. Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age

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First of all, I would like to pay tribute to Peter L. Berger (1929-2017), an internationally renowned sociologist of religion, who passed away on 27 June 2017 while I was reading this book for this review. May his soul rest in peace!

Berger presents the objective of this new book as a contribution to a 'new paradigm' for religion in a pluralist age in replacement of the 'old' secularization paradigm (IV). Compared to the 'de-secularization of the world' thesis, which was published in a collective work in 1999 as a modification of his support during the 1960s to that 'old paradigm', Berger rethinks, in this book, his 'recantation' (Bruce 2001, 100): the old thesis of secularization was not totally erroneous.

What is radically new in this book is the distinction between 'two pluralisms': a pluralism of religious beliefs and groups and a pluralism of religious and secular discourse (53). The 'first pluralism' is the object of the first three chapters, which resume and slightly rework his previously published ideas. Among the innovations are mainly the development on pluralism at the global level (while previously it concerned quasi exclusively the modernized world) and the emphasis on the nature and role of some contemporary religious forms, notably Pentecostalism and Islam, in promoting or resisting against the modernization of countries. The main argument here is that 'pluralism is now a global phenomenon' (1) and that it 'relativizes and thereby undermines many of the certainties by which human beings used to live' (9). This pluralism operates dialectically at the social-structural level and at the level of human, subjective consciousness. In effect, pluralism is 'a social situation in which people with different ethnicities, worldviews, and moralities live together peacefully and interact each other amicably. The last phrase is important' (1). As such, pluralism undermines taken-for-granted certainties by the process of 'cognitive contamination', which relativizes the religious beliefs and practices. At the same time, pluralism, which is a consequence of modernization, de-institutionalizes. Referring to Arnold Gehlen, for Berger de-institutionalization is an enlarging of the 'foreground' realm, where reflection and choice are imperatives, but also a shrinking of the 'background', where actions and ways of living are taken for granted (5-8). This process is a 'huge transformation in the human condition from fate to choice' (5). That is why in a pluralistic situation, institutions become weaker as voluntary associations. Two opposite reactions to this process emerge in the consciousness of the individual: relativism

as 'the embrace, a celebration of relativity', and fundamentalism as 'an effort to restore the threatened certainties' (9).

According to Berger, pluralism is now a global phenomenon: 'in a globalized modernity, almost everyone talks with everyone else directly or indirectly; [...] most of our contemporaries are aware of the fact that there are different ways of life, different values, different worldviews. Sooner or later, they will be plunged into the vortex of the pluralist dynamic' (15). But the contemporary world continues to be as 'intensely religious as any in history. Every major religious tradition not only survives but has generated powerful revival movements' (21). Among these, the most interesting here are Pentecostalism and Islam. The first is a modernizing force and is exploding numerically while at the same time having a strong supernaturalist view of the world. Quoting David Martin, the leading scholar of that phenomenon, Berger refers to it as 'a revolution that was not supposed to happen' (24). For him, two hypotheses explain the global growth of this movement: the cargo cult applied to the 'prosperity gospel' (i.e. the idea that the material rewards will come supernaturally to Gods worshipers who give money to preachers) and Max Weber's Protestant Ethic (25). The comparison with the resurgence of Islam is made by contrast: if the discrepancy with modernity is more glaring in the Arab heartlands, it is less so in Muslim countries outside that region, everywhere; however, Islam has been the source of bitter resentment and anti-Western animus on the part of Muslims (26).

Chapters four through six, which contain more new developments in Berger's thought, explain the 'second pluralism', the coexistence of religious discourses and secular discourse. For Berger, the latter is dominant because it occupies the primary, public (political and economic) spheres. This pluralism is also analysed at the global level. It is especially this second pluralism which justifies Berger's affirmation that 'the earlier theory [of secularization] was not completely wrong. Modernity has indeed produced a secular discourse, which enables people to deal with many areas of life without reference to any religious definitions of reality' (51).

To clarify this pluralism, Berger recalls the theory of differentiation by relying on certain authors, like José Casanova (1994, 18), who identified differentiation as the core of the process and the theory of secularization, as it was defended in particular by Émile Durkheim and Max Weber as well as and Hugo Grotius, who theorized international law with the principle of 'methodological atheism' (*etsi Deus non daretur*, "as if God were not given", that is, "as if God did not exist", p. 52). This idea is drawn by Berger from Charles Taylor (2007, 126f.), and he quotes from the concept of the 'immanent frame'. This idea is also expressed by that of 'exclusive humanism', explained by Taylor himself (Taylor 2007, 63). With the process of differentiation, Western civilization can be described and managed without any notion of transcendence (51).

Berger also modifies his definition of religion as a 'sacred canopy'. In his book *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), this concept implied meanings that embraced the whole society for an integrated meaningful human world. In this sense, the whole society was the 'plausibility structure' of these meanings. The sacred canopy was the main source of the religious certainty thanks to the widespread social confirmation. Berger now defines this concept as referring to the Tillichian concept of the 'ultimate concern', even if it is only one individual who has this concern (58). This allows Berger to elaborate at length the pluralism of the coexistence between religious discourses (sacred canopies) and the secular discourse. The diverse forms of this coexistence delineate the 'multiple modernities' throughout the world. Berger calls these forms 'formulas of peace' and 'formulas for a co-existence of different religious traditions and institutions within a society' (79). As there were many altars in the Roman Empire according to the Apostle Paul (79), there are many altars in modern states in which the pluralistic situation requires various formulas of peace. From the 'official indifference' of the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire to the separation of church and state, developed by thinkers of the Enlightenment and

realized in nineteenth-century revolutions, many other formulas have been tried: the Ottoman Empire's *millet* system, the Chinese Confucian-mandarin formula, the *dhimmi* formula in the Muslim world, etc. (Chapter 6).

The book includes three responses to Berger, by authors known for their interest in and academic work related to Berger's ideas: Nancy T. Ammerman (94-110), Detlef Pollack (111-122), and Fenggang Yang (123-140). I myself tried to introduce the first pluralism in Berger's works from the sixties to 2011 in my recent book where I concluded that Berger did not abandon the secularization thesis (Nizigama 2017, 120ff.) but rather that he moderated it by what Detlef Pollack calls here the 'undermining theorem'. Berger's argument in this book about the second pluralism comforts my view. Detlef Pollack also shares my view: Berger makes clear that his abandoning of the presuppositions of secularization theory does not mean its reversal' (114). As the 'undermining theorem' is 'the core of any secularization theory', Berger would have had to abandon this undermining theorem if he wanted to abandon the old secularization theory (116). I have some hesitation to follow Nancy T. Ammerman on her critique of Berger's 'sacred-secular binary' (100) and her argument in favour of a 'mix of sacred and secular' in the everyday life of believers (103). But her insights about everyday life narratives and 'lived religion' (101) seem to me very instructive. I follow Fenggang Yang in his critique of 'a normative theory for religion in the modern world', which he sees as the project of this, Berger's book (126f.). Following this last author, finally, I would say that this book is a defence of religious pluralism as the best 'formula of peace' in the contemporary world, not merely a paradigm of 'plurality' in the scientific study of contemporary pluralized religions.

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