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# Peter Berger on the Rise and Fall of the Theory of Secularization

*Dylan Reaves*

Though an interest in modernity may be greater in the overall scheme of his work, discussions of secularization are the earliest consistent theme in the writing of sociologist and theologian Peter Berger. From his very first book, he shows a great deal of interest in the causes of secularization, its effects, and possible ways to react to it – even reverse it. However, unlike his stances on many other issues, such as modernity and politics, his perspective on secularization has changed radically over time. Early in his career, Berger, like most sociologists in the 1960's, believed that secularization was an inevitable byproduct of modernization and that religion was slowly fading out of society. As time went on, he and his academic peers began to realize that not only was this not the case, but nearly the opposite was occurring. Religion was (and still is) experiencing resurgences in various forms all over the world. Thus, his discussion on secularization goes from one of concern with the loss of religion to the task of explaining why his earlier predictions did not occur.

## **The History of Secularization**

Berger contends that an explanation of the history and origins of secularization is crucial to understanding any argument about it. Originally, “secularization” simply referred to the removal of land from religious authority. Of course, this canon definition is not necessarily a complete view of the implications of the word today, as it has taken on radically different and emotionally charged connotations for different groups of people. For example, for Christians, secularization is sometimes equitable with de-Christianization, heresy, “paganization”, and other negative terms, while for modern atheist and agnostic groups, secularization is often associated with progress, freedom from religion, and liberation of mind. Berger himself defines secularization as “*the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols*” (Berger 1967, 107). Thus, all forms are encompassed, whether that be the original meaning involving the loss of land, the more modern cultural shift away from “sacred” control, or the resulting shift in consciousness that comes from this societal change.

As a specialist in the sociology of knowledge, Berger seeks to identify the building blocks, so to speak, of any major societal thought process. One of the most important ways to do this is to understand the “primary carriers” of any change in social consciousness. Primary carriers are the institutions and practices that are directly responsible for affecting and altering the way people think. Berger maintains that those nearest to, most affected by, and most involved in industrial society are the ones most affected by secularization. Thus, industrialism itself is the primary carrier of secularization. This is a result of numerous factors, including the fact that highly industrialized societies typically have more explanations for natural phenomena, or as Berger refers to it, “*the pervasive influence of science*” (Berger 1967, 110). It is this connection that is partially responsible for Berger’s initial linking of the process of modernization with that of secularization, for industrialism and technological advancement are primary carriers of both.

In what might be a surprising argument, Berger states that some of the roots of secularization lie in Christianity; specifically, in Protestantism. In fact, he asserts that there have been secularizing notions coming from Christianity since its earliest days, even back into its origins in Judaism. Most recently, this was epitomized in the drastic changes brought about by Martin Luther in 1517, during the Protestant Reformation. Essentially, Protestantism removed all of the more ethereal or “magical” aspects of Catholicism, whittling the faith down to a more basic level. According to this new form of Christian thought, miracles no longer occurred with the same frequency, or had the same significance as they once had. Mass, with its deep meanings and weekly miracle of transubstantiation (the conversion of bread and wine to the actual body and blood of Christ), was done away with entirely. All communication with the souls of the dead, or any significance of the saints beyond historical interest, was eliminated. Protestants did not believe the world was constantly being affected by divine forces; instead, God had a more laissez-faire approach, though certainly not to the extent of Deism. The sacred and the profane were pulled further from one another, existing in two entirely separate and rarely, if ever, connected realities. Many of these beliefs were long held to be essential to belief in God, or Christianity. When people began to lose the miraculous and transcendent aspects of religion, it became easier and easier to pull away from the religion as a whole – in other words, to become secularized. For Protestants, there was only one manner of communication with the divine, and only one fragile thread connecting an individual with God. When this line of communication fell into doubt, the entire foundation of that individual’s beliefs was destroyed.

Going further back into the historical roots of Christianity, even Judaism was

extremely secularizing when compared to the faiths of the other cultures that surrounded the early Jews. For other prominent societies around the Israelites, such as the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, the sacred was constantly interacting with our world. Every major event, every human action, every position of power, was as a direct result of the interference of the gods, or their divine will. The world and its people existed in connection with, and under the blanket of, the world of their divinities. This is another important consideration – there were numerous gods and goddesses, all with different personalities and domains of power.

The Judeo-Christian God, on the other hand, is a solitary and omnipotent being. Unlike the gods of their oppressors, the god of Israel did not exist inside the Israelite's cosmos, and was instead outside of it. He had not been created along with the world; he created it, and was timeless, having no beginning set by any kind of creation. This god was not connected to the Israelites by any territorial or "natural" law; instead, they were bonded by a pact, a covenant, and were only bonded through this historical agreement and resulting obedience. Finally, this new god was entirely unaffected by human meddling – no amount of magic or ritual could do anything to this omnipotent master. Man's history became extremely important, replacing the mythology of other societies with accounts of great people – King David, the prophets, and Esther, for example. All of these factors were extremely secularizing, as God is removed from mankind to an extent hitherto unknown in other religions. Everything was rationalized, and the early religious leaders made sure to purge the faith of many "magical" understandings that had previously been standard in religions across the globe. Thus, from its creation in exceptionally rational Judaism, to its removal from the retrogress of Catholicism into mysticism as a result of the Protestant Reformation, Christianity has had a great deal to do with secularization in the cultures it influences.

### **Secularization and the Modern Church**

Though Christianity certainly has many of the roots of secularization, there are numerous factors in the modern world contributing to its spread. Most directly responsible for this is pluralism, the growing acceptance of having large numbers of religions co-existing. This has to do with the Bergerian concept of "legitimations." Legitimations are the objectified "knowledge" that explains, and most significantly, justifies the social order – in other words, the explanations of why things are the way they are. Historically, religion itself is the most legitimating force for any given society. As such, a society with only one religion requires very few legitimations and is extremely powerful. However, as more religions are introduced,

it becomes increasingly difficult to resist anomic interference, for the legitimations of any one religion seem increasingly weak. Additionally, religion can no longer rely on the government in a pluralistic society, for all religions are treated equally in some manner (whether that be equally oppressed or equally supported). As religion begins to take on a form more palatable to the everyday citizen of a pluralistic society, it becomes increasingly individualistic in order to not interfere with the other affairs of this individual. Thus, secularization is furthered in this divide between private religion and public secularism. Again, there is connection here with the process of modernity, for secularization is aided by the public/private division that Berger previously cited as a byproduct of modernization.

Berger was very concerned in his early writing with the effect that this would have on the church – arguably, his theological standpoints have been influenced by this concern ever since he first expressed this fear. He argued that religious institutions are aware that the modern world is changing their strength, and as a result, are changing the ways in which they interact with society. Bureaucratic practices are becoming both more common and more necessary in the churches. As they bureaucratize, the different faiths, as well as different sub divisions in each faith, become increasingly cooperative. The ecumenical movement, characterized as an attempt by the different denominations to come together and consolidate some beliefs in order to not be so divided, of the early and mid-20th century is a perfect example of this occurrence. When the different denominations begin to cooperate in this way, there is naturally some degree of homogenization. Essentially, the faith world itself turns into a marketplace. Religion becomes a commodity, one that gradually changes to fit the demand of the buyer. Indeed, the religious bureaucracies can and do begin to form cartels, getting together to metaphorically “set prices” on their religious goods and to further collaborate on what to give the people.

Ultimately, all these shifting mentalities within the church caused what is commonly referred to as the “crisis of theology.” Countless views have surfaced and been countered within theology, creating a great deal of disparity and debate within the church itself. The liberalism of some is countered by the orthodoxy of others, only to be challenged again by a radically secularized version of theology itself, with the drastic “death of God” movement. Berger did not say definitively what the outcome of this would be. However, it does seem that Berger, in the end, believed that the destination of modern society was going to end in the general secularization of the world.

## Desecularization

This, however, was not to be his final view. As time passed, Berger began to realize that, despite his own predictions and the predictions of the academic community at large, the world has not been completely secularized. To the contrary, he ultimately argues that the world is as religious as ever, and in fact, in some cases, is more so now than it was before. This directly disproves the so-called secularization theory of the 1950's and 60's, as outlined above, which suggested that it was an unavoidable fact of modernization that the world would become more and more secular. To some extent, he believes that the theory was partially right, for modernization has had some overall secularizing effects. But importantly, modernization has also led to numerous counter-secularizing efforts. Additionally, he notes that "*secularization on the societal level is not necessarily linked to secularization on the level of individual consciousness*" (Berger 1999, 3).

Reactions to secularization from religion necessarily came in one of two forms: rejection, or adaptation. Rejecting the secularized worldview requires implementing one of two strategies. First is the strategy of religious revolution, wherein a religious institution attempts to take over an entire society and mandate the counter-secularization for everyone. This, however, is rarely if ever successful, the closest that exists today being near-theocracies such as the mullahs of Iran. The second and more realistically viable strategy is the creation of religious subcultures, sectarian groups that try to distance themselves from the influence of society at large. Interestingly, this shows that secularization theory was also proved wrong in regard to the way the adaptive strategies would be implemented. A strict believer in secularization theory would have argued that the success of religious institutions would depend on the degree to which they had adapted to secularity. To the contrary, in the modern world, religious institutions have tended to succeed based on the degree to which they do *not* adapt to a secular mindset.

In terms of global scale, conservative and orthodox traditionalist movements are on the rise more than any other religious mindset. This can certainly be seen in the rise in Evangelicalism in American Protestant faith, but moreover, similar trends in faith can be found in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and nearly all other major world religions. All could be called "fundamentalist," and though Berger dislikes the term for its pejorative connotation, he does note that they can all be unified under certain shared characteristics: "*great religious passion, a defiance of what others have defined as the Zeitgeist, and a return to traditional sources of religious authority*" (Berger 1999, 6). Additionally, all can be understood as a reaction against the forces of secularity. He suspects that this is as a result of moder-

nity itself, for modernity brings with it uncertainty through pluralization and other forces; as such, a movement, such as religion, that claims certainty is incredibly appealing.

In order to understand this further, Berger attempts a brief examination of the two religious upsurges he views as “most dynamic” today – the Islamic and Evangelical. The Islamic revival is notably a revival of extremely religious commitments. It is very strong even in highly modern and urban areas of the East, to the surprise of what would be the traditional intellectual assumption. It is not even a fully uniform revival, for some areas, such as Indonesia, have Islamic movements that are outspokenly pro-democracy and pluralism. Overall, however, Berger would argue that Islam has been severely challenged by facing up to facets of the modern world. The Evangelic upsurge is also taking place in a massive geographic scope, and interestingly, has taken on a powerfully indigenous growth pattern. This underlines one key difference between the Islamic and Evangelical movements, for the former is occurring in already Muslim dominated countries, while the latter is growing enormously in areas of the world previously unfamiliar with the Christian faith.

There are, of course, exceptions to any rule, and Berger does acknowledge that there are two cases that do not directly fit the desecularization thesis. The first is Europe, specifically Western Europe, which has become increasingly secular as the years go by. It has been suggested, however, that this is not pure secularization so much as a shift in the institutional location of religion, for while there have been dramatic drops in such factors as church attendance, levels of faith-adherents are debatably stable. The matter is still up for discussion. The other exception, which has been subtly hinted at already, is in the Western intellectual community, which remains as a whole quite secular – an important realization, considering it is often the intellectuals who have a great deal of control over society as a whole. Berger semi-humorously states “*that the American intelligentsia has been ‘Europeanized,’ in its attitude to religion as in other matters*” (Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008, 18).

Beyond this wide scope idea of the status of desecularization in the world, Berger is interested in many more questions for consideration on the matter. “*First, what are the origins of the worldwide resurgence of religion?*” (Berger 1999, 12). Berger has proposed two possible answers; one suggesting that it is a quest for certainty in the fact of the uncertainty brought about by modernity, and the other that it is a rebellion against the secularism of the elite minority. Berger, however, posits an intriguing third option for consideration, suggesting that because religion has

always been around and has always been a driving force in society, what is more in need of explanation is the (possibly brief) appearance of the *absence* of religion.

After wondering about its roots, a second question merits attention, "*what is likely the future course of this religious resurgence?*" (Berger 1999, 14) Though hesitant to make any concrete predictions, Berger does make the rather bold statement of belief that the 21st century will be just as religious as ever before. Some sociologists have contended that this spike in religious movements has been a final reaction signalling the beginning of the secular era, but Berger finds this doubtful. He does, however, make it clear that the prediction about religion as a whole remaining successful in the future does not apply equally to all movements. For instance, he suspects that militant Islam will essentially be forced to die down. Third, and finally, the question becomes comparative: "*Do the resurgent religions differ in their critique of the secular order?*" (Berger 1999, 15) Put simply, of course they do! The Dalai Lama and the Pope will naturally have differing views on the matter based on their own faith tradition. Despite this, it does seem that in the end, what adherents of almost every faith can all agree upon is that a culture that tries to exist without any sort of transcendent viewpoint is a shallow one.

Finally, there are four major areas that Berger argues in which the resurgence of religion and the overcoming of secularism could have interesting affects. First is international politics. It has been suggested that the wars of the future will be predominantly ideological ones, and religion could certainly be an important factor in that. Though the Cold War is over, Berger hints at the fact that he does not believe this invalidates this theory, and that something akin to the Cold War could very well happen again. It is, however, significant to note the differences between legitimately religiously inspired political movements versus those that use religion to legitimate politics based on non-religious interests. Second, and integrally related, is the issue of war and peace, an issue upon which religion can and often is divided between the two sides. Berger acknowledges that religion can be used both to support and legitimate warfare and to counter it, advocating instead for pacifism and peace. He does not clearly fall on either side when discussing what the future role of religion on this matter will be. Third is a matter that sociologists have understood as integrally related ever since Max Weber's famous work on Protestantism and capitalism; religion and economic development. The modernization of various countries in the third world, combined with the unique state of interconnectivity found in the modern world, has created an environment for these developing countries which has never before been seen. Religious resurgence or counter secularization could be either a bane or blessing for this process, and



without a historical example to judge by, it is nearly impossible to decide which. Fourth and finally are the matters of human rights and social justice, where matters are often complicated as important national decisions are made on a clearly religious influence.

## Conclusion

Berger's discussion of secularization has a deep importance on countless levels. Both religious and non-religious individuals can benefit from understanding this incredibly important, and rapidly changing, dynamic of our society. Those who do have faith would do well to understand the role that religion itself had in secularization, as well as to understand what causes it – if the goal is to try to stop it. On the other hand, those who want a secularized world have much to gain from understanding the process of desecularization, if for no other reason than to try to change the minds of the masses on a more fundamental level.

Of course, one does not have to take anything Berger says on the matter with a reaction of fear or dogmatism. It is entirely possible to read on the matter with nothing more than an interest in understanding a major component of the functioning of the modern world. But to do this seems irresponsible, and against Berger's intention. He frequently suggests that the role of anyone attempting a sociological understanding of society is to try to make sure that society is accurately understood so that those who want change can make it. As elucidated above, the process of secularization and desecularization is not self-contained and will not only affect the religious community. To the contrary, it will have far reaching effects in global policy issues and shape the way humans interact with one another on every societal level. Thus, even if one chooses not to argue for the virtues of one side or the other, in the end, every person should have an understanding of how these factors could affect their own lives, and the lives of the rest of the world.

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