

Religious Pluralism: Undermining or Reinforcing Religiosity?

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Published online: 23 February 2016
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Abstract This article deals with the question whether the pluralization of the religious field enhances or undermines the stability and intensity of individual religiosity. The classical theory developed by Peter L. Berger points out the corrosive effects of religious pluralism. The so-called economic market model (Rodney Stark and his followers) revises Berger's assumption and states that the vitality of religion is not weakened but fostered by the competition of various religious providers. By comparing the effects of religious pluralism in the United States and in some Western European countries, this analysis concludes that a religiously heterogeneous surrounding does not strengthen, but rather weakens individual religiosity. To that extent it confirms Berger's hypothesis. But if modernization inevitably leads to religious pluralism, as Berger assumes, and religious pluralization leads to religious relativization, we can conclude that modernization very likely leads to secularization, which contradicts Berger's recantation of the secularization theory.

Keywords Secularization · Religious pluralization · Economic market model

This article focuses on the question, what are the consequences of the pluralization of the religious field for individual religiosity. Peter L. Berger (1979, 2014: 10, 20) assumes that religious diversity undermines the taken-for-granted validity of individual belief systems and religious homogeneity en-

hances it. Even if he distances himself from his earlier secularization theory, he has not given up that theoretical assumption. His recantation of the secularization theory only had empirical reasons: In the light of the explosion of passionate religious movements in modern and modernizing countries such as the U.S. or countries in Latin America or Asia he abandoned the thesis that modernization necessarily leads to secularization. Modernization has not inevitably led to a complete secularization of the society, as the secularization theory assumes (Berger 2014: 28). Rather, the inevitable consequence of modernity has been the pluralization of world views and value systems. But as far as the effects of pluralization are concerned he still holds on to the assumption that religious certainties are eroded by the growing pluralism of religious options. The corrosive effects of religious pluralism are due to the fact that different religious world views relativize each other and call their validity mutually into question. Religious perceptions and practices, however, gain in stability if they are surrounded by a homogeneous plausibility structure.

Berger's hypothesis has been challenged by the so-called economic market model that reverses his assumption (Stark and Finke 2000). The vitality of religion is not weakened but enhanced by the competition of various religious providers. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the proponents of this model developed their proposition in direct dissociation from Berger's approach: Where a single religious group holds a monopolistic position, it loses attractiveness; where many different religious groups compete for the favor of religious consumers, the general level of religiousness rises. The proponents of the market model, Rodney Stark and his colleagues, trace back this mechanism to the fact, that in a religiously pluralistic situation religious suppliers feel provoked by other religious suppliers to improve their services whereas the clerics of a church which holds a religious monopoly tend to become lazy and indifferent to the needs of their clients.

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Table 1 Church membership in Western Germany 1950–2010

	Population	Members of protestant churches	In per cent of population	Members of catholic church	In per cent of population
1950	50,798	26,172	5.5	22,518	44.3
1970	61,001	28,378	46.5	27,206	44.6
1990	63,726	25,156	39.5	27,423	43.0
2010	65,426	20,863	31.9	23,848	36.5

1950–1990 with West-Berlin and Saarland, 1995–2010 without Berlin

Sources: Statistisches Bundesamt, Statis; for 1950: Ergebnisse der Volkszählung, cf. Kirchliches Jahrbuch 85, 1958, 430 f.; for Catholics: Liedhegener 2006: Tab. A 2.1 as well as Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, Eckdaten des kirchlichen Lebens 1990 und 2010; 1990 figures estimated according to IKSE 1997, estimates for 1995; for Protestants 1961: Kirchliches Jahrbuch 114, 1987, 417; otherwise: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 1997: 78; Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2006: 6; Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2011: 6

Additionally, if different religious offers are available the religious individual has the opportunity to choose between religious alternatives to find the appropriate offer which fits his or her needs, in contrast to a religiously monopolistic situation in which the religious consumer in the event of dissatisfaction with the religious supply only has the option to defect from religion entirely.

Both hypotheses seem to be convincing. On the theoretical level we cannot decide which one is right. That's why I will switch from the level of theoretical considerations to the level of empirical analysis. . What I am going to do now is to test both hypotheses by comparing the impact of growing religious pluralism on individual religiosity in the United States and in Germany with each other on an empirical basis. By doing so, I subdivide my leading question into two questions. First: To what extent has the degree of religious pluralism really increased in the United States and in Germany during the last decades? How much does it differ in both countries?

Table 2 Religious Pluralism in Western Germany and the United States (2008/09) (in per cent)

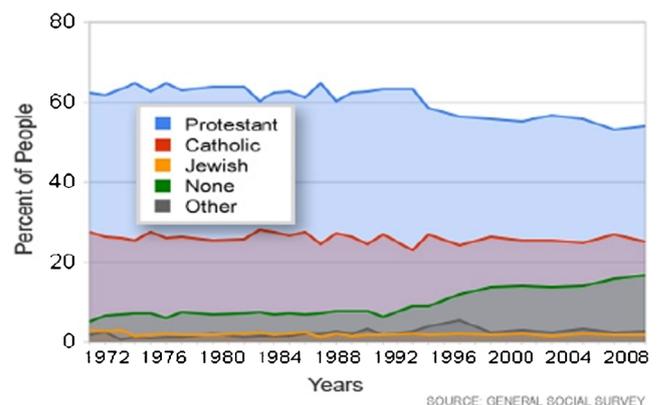
Religion / Religious Community	Western Germany	United States
Catholic church	36.5	23.9
Protestant Churches	31.9	51.3
Mormons		1.7
Congregational Chapels	1.8	
Orthodox Churches	1.7	0.6
Jehovah's Witnesses		0.7
Judaism	0.2	1.7
Islam	4.9	0.4
Hinduism	0.1	0.4
Buddhism	0.3	0.7
New Religions / esoteric groups	1.2	
No church affiliation	21.4	16.0
Sum	100.0	100.0

Source: REMID, Pew Forum

Second: How does the growing plurality of religious communities influence individual religiosity?

In 1949 when the Federal Republic was founded 96 % of the west-German population belonged to one of the Christian churches, either the Catholic Church or the Lutheran churches. Four per cent were either non-members or members of congregational chapels or of non-Christian religious communities (cf. Table 1). Today, in Western Germany, no more than 70 % belong to the Protestant or the Catholic Church (cf. Table 2). About 20 % are unaffiliated with any religion and about 10 % are members of congregational chapels, the Russian-Orthodox Church, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam or esoteric groups. Among them 5 % alone belong to Islam.

In the United States the degree of religious pluralism also has increased in the last decades (cf. Graph 1). In the 19th Century Protestantism entirely dominated the religious landscape. Even in 1960 the share of Protestants still amounted to 70 % of the American population. In the meantime the percentage declined to about 50 %. Today, 25 % are Catholic, less than 2 % Jewish, and 2–3 % belong to Non-Christian religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam (cf. Table 2). This comparatively small percentage of members of non-Christian religions comes as a surprise since most observers associate the United States with a highly religiously pluralistic country full of



SOURCE: GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY

Graph 1 American's religious affiliations

Table 3 Inter-marriage Patterns (in %)

		Spouse is			
		Catholic	Protestant	All other	Unaffiliated
Catholics	West-Germany U.S.	74	22	1	3
		78	14	3	5
Protestants	West-Germany U.S.	20	69	2	8
		10	81	3	6
Others	West-Germany U.S.	6	8	82	4
Unaffiliated	West-Germany U.S.	16	18	4	61
		22	28	9	41

Quelle: Pew Forum 2008: 34f

religious dynamics and competition (Stark and Finke 2000; Eck 2001). If you take into account that in Germany and other West-European countries the share of Muslims alone stands at 5 % and more, our image of a highly pluralistic religious field in the United States in contrast to a religiously monopolistic situation in Europe is questioned. Religious diversity in the U.S. is predominantly a phenomenon within American Protestantism. The denominational distribution in the U.S. and in Western Germany is rather similar: three quarter belong to Christian churches, one fifth is unaffiliated, and no more than 5 to 8 % are members of non-Christian religions. The pluralism-index is in the U.S. even lower than in Western Germany. It stands at 0.67 in the U.S. and at 0.70 in West Germany (Great Britain: 0.71, Switzerland: 0.71). Only if one subdivides Protestantism into several groups the pluralism-index in the U.S. exceeds that in Germany. Then it amounts to 0.85 in the U.S. The difference between the U.S. and Germany is significant, but not large.

People do not make their religious choices on the macro-sociological level of countries or states, but on the level of their immediate life world of their personal networks and relations.

Therefore I am now going to analyze the religious diversity of marriages, family ties, neighborhoods and contacts at the working place. By looking at the religious heterogeneity of

marriages in the United States we observe only a minority who live in religiously diverse marriages. Seventy-eight per cent of the married Catholics are married with Catholics (cf. Table 3). Fourteen more per cent of them are married with Protestants. The marriage behavior of Catholics displays only a small degree of external openness. Only 3 % of Catholics are married with members of non-Christian religious communities and 5 % with unchurched people. Something similar can be noticed with the Protestants. More than 90 % of them are married with another Christian partner. We get the impression that a Christian majority reproduces itself and keeps the doors to the outside relatively closed.

The same is true for Western Germany. Ninety per cent of the Christians are married with other Christians. Only between 4 and 10 % have a spouse who is either unaffiliated or belongs to a non-Christian denomination (cf. Table 3).

The intermarriage homogeneity among the unaffiliated is lower. In the U.S. it lies below the level of West Germany. The lower degree of intermarriage homogeneity in America reflects its higher level of overall religiosity.

What can we state about the degree of religious diversity in the wider family (beyond marriage), in the neighborhood, at the working place and in the spare time? The ‘Religion Monitor’ (Religionsmonitor) of Bertelsmann Foundation in 2012 asked people in various European countries and in the

Table 4 Religious Pluralism in Family

	People in your family and relatives with whom you have regular contact: how many belong to a different religious group than yourself?			Total
	Less than half	About half	More than half	
Switzerland	80,8 %	10,2 %	9,1 %	100,0 %
Spain	90,3 %	4,9 %	4,8 %	100,0 %
France	76,9 %	13,8 %	9,3 %	100,0 %
Sweden	89,1 %	5,1 %	5,9 %	100,0 %
United Kingdom	74,8 %	13,4 %	11,8 %	100,0 %
West-Germany	85,5 %	7,0 %	7,5 %	100,0 %
USA	64,5 %	18,1 %	17,4 %	100,0 %

Source: Religion Monitor (Bertelsmann Foundation), 2012

Table 5 Religious Pluralism in Neighborhood

	People with whom you have regular contact in your neighbourhood, how many belong to a different religious group than yourself?			Total
	Less than half	About half	More than half	
Switzerland	70,8 %	16,5 %	12,7 %	100,0 %
Spain	84,8 %	7,6 %	7,6 %	100,0 %
France	60,7 %	20,8 %	18,5 %	100,0 %
Sweden	80,6 %	13,4 %	6,0 %	100,0 %
United Kingdom	62,3 %	18,8 %	19,0 %	100,0 %
West-Germany	75,7 %	10,6 %	13,7 %	100,0 %
USA	51,6 %	24,8 %	23,6 %	100,0 %

Source: Religion Monitor (Bertelsmann Foundation), 2012

U.S., how many people in their family, to which they have regular contact, belong to a different religious group than themselves. Only 17 % of the Americans say that more than half of the people in their family, to which they have regular contact, belong to a different religious group than themselves (cf. Table 4). Two thirds state that less than half of the people in their family, to which they have regular contact, belong to a different religious group than themselves. In Europe the share of people, who in their family have regular contact to people of a different religious affiliation, is lower, but the differences between the U.S. and Western European countries are not huge.

The same pattern applies to the religious diversity of regular contacts people have to other people in their neighborhood (cf. Table 5), at their work place or place of training (cf. Table 6) and their spare time (cf. Table 7). In any case, only a minority state that they have most of their regular contacts to people who belong to a different faith than themselves.

To sum up: Religious diversity has been growing in the last decades both in the U.S. and in West Germany as well. The degree of religious pluralism seems to be higher in the U.S. than in West Germany. The difference, however, appears to be minor.

Please, let me come to my second question within my empirical analysis: What are the consequences of religious pluralism for individual religiosity? I measure individual religiosity by church attendance, belief in God and the importance people place to religiosity and spirituality in their lives.

As a result of our analysis we can ascertain (cf. Table 8, column 2, last line), that in the U.S. regular contacts to people in the family, in the neighborhood, at work and in spare time, who in their majority belong to a different religious group, do not have the effect of increasing church attendance.¹ On the

contrary, as far as the group of Americans is concerned, who have most of their regular contacts in their family, in their neighborhood, at their work place or in their spare time to people with a different faith, we can state, that they tend to attend Sunday services less often than Americans whose regular contact persons by their majority do not belong to a different religious group. This means that in the U.S. contacts to people of a different faith do not contribute to an increase of church attendance, but have the reverse effect. In Europa, there is no significant correlation between interreligious contacts and church attendance (cf. Table 8, column 2).

The pattern becomes even clearer if we take belief in God and judging the importance of religion and spirituality into account. Who has in his family, neighborhood, at his work place or in his spare time most of his regular contacts to people of a different religious group, displays in the U.S. a lower probability to believe in God and to place high importance to religion and spirituality than those who have most of their contacts to people of the same faith (cf. Table 8, column 3–5, last line). In Europe, however, belief in God and religiosity are not inhibited by interreligious contacts. In some European countries such as Sweden, Switzerland, and France belief in God, religiosity and spirituality even profit from interreligious communications. The correlations are reversed in respect to what the economic market model assumes: In the U.S. religious diversity tends to weaken religious vitality; in highly secularized European countries like Sweden, Switzerland and France belief in God, religiosity and spirituality are enhanced by a religiously diverse context.

The explanation for this counter-intuitive result could be that in the religiously vital U.S.A. contacts to people of a different faith are more perceived as a challenge to one's own belief system and in highly secularized countries more as its reinforcement. In the U.S. one's own belief is especially questioned by other beliefs, in Europe especially by non-believers. In the U.S. the dividing line runs between various religions and confessions, in Europe between belief and unbelief. In both cases religious practices and convictions are supported by people

¹ In order to measure the effects of interreligious contacts, I have composed an index consisting of all four variables by which interreligious contacts are measured (religious pluralism in family, in neighborhood, at work and in spare time).

Table 6 Religious Pluralism at Work

	People with whom you have regular contact at your work or place of training, how many belong to a different religious group than yourself?			Total
	Less than half	About half	More than half	
Switzerland	64,4 %	18,3 %	17,4 %	100,0 %
Spain	83,7 %	7,8 %	8,5 %	100,0 %
France	62,7 %	18,5 %	18,9 %	100,0 %
Sweden	77,7 %	11,0 %	11,4 %	100,0 %
United Kingdom	57,5 %	15,0 %	27,4 %	100,0 %
West-Germany	69,2 %	11,3 %	19,6 %	100,0 %
USA	55,5 %	16,8 %	27,7 %	100,0 %

Source: Religion Monitor (Bertelsmann Foundation), 2012

Table 7 Religious Pluralism in Spare Time

	People with whom you have regular contact in your spare time, how many belong to a different religious group than yourself?			Total
	Less than half	About half	More than half	
Switzerland	76,3 %	14,8 %	8,9 %	100,0 %
Spain	88,7 %	5,2 %	6,1 %	100,0 %
France	67,0 %	17,7 %	15,2 %	100,0 %
Sweden	83,8 %	8,7 %	7,5 %	100,0 %
United Kingdom	68,3 %	16,9 %	14,8 %	100,0 %
West-Germany	77,9 %	11,0 %	11,1 %	100,0 %
USA	61,3 %	20,3 %	18,5 %	100,0 %

Source: Religion Monitor (Bertelsmann Foundation), 2012

who share the same practices and convictions. In one case, the people of a different faith who inhibit one's own religiousness are those who belong to a different religious group, in the other, they are the non-believers. In other words, a religiously homogeneous surrounding – as differently its boundaries may be

defined – does not weaken, but strengthen religious vitality. Berger's hypothesis, that religious diversity undermines the plausibility of religious belief systems and religious homogeneity reinforces it, is by our empirical analysis confirmed in a splendid way.

Table 8 Correlation between Religious Pluralism (Sum of all Four Variables) and Individual Religiosity

Country	How often do you attend religious services/at a synagogue/go to temple/take part in Friday prayer/spiritual rituals or religious practices?	How strongly do you believe that God or something divine exists?	Importance of area of life: Religion	Importance of area of life: Spirituality
Switzerland	n.s.	n.s.	.153**	.141*
Spain	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
France	n.s.	.207**	.185*	.219**
Sweden	n.s.	.192*	.217**	n.s.
United Kingdom	n.s.	.158*	n.s.	.269**
West-Germany	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
USA	-.126*	-.143**	-.189**	-.124*

**. Correlation significant on the level of 0.01

*. Correlation significant on the level of 0.05

Source: Religion Monitor (Bertelsmann Foundation), 2012

The positive correlation between religious homogeneity and religious stability is also underscored by another result of the Bertelsmann Religion Monitor. If religious people have most of their contacts with other religious people, irrespective of whether they belong to the same or another religious denomination, their church attendance and individual religiosity will be higher compared to religious people who don't have contacts with other religious people. This result applies to Europe as well as to the U.S. In any case, being embedded in religious networks supports and strengthens religious convictions and practices. If the economic market model sometimes detects positive effects of religious diversity on religious commitment, this has certainly to do with the fact that a religiously diverse surrounding can foster internal ties of religious communities. Also in this case the question is, whether the stabilizing effects of religious diversity can be traced back to internal religiously homogeneous milieus.

To conclude: Modernization inevitably leads to religious pluralism. In this respect, I agree with Peter L. Berger. Furthermore, religious pluralization in the U.S., as we have seen in our empirical analysis, has negative effects on the stability of church adherence and individual religiosity and spirituality. This result of our analysis can also be confirmed by a look at the variations in Protestantism in the U.S. Protestantism is the most diverse religious denomination in the U.S and at the same time that denomination most affected by decline. Maybe, it is not necessary that the outcome of modernization is secularization, as Peter L. Berger asserts. But as our empirical examples demonstrated, it is very likely. If modernization inevitably leads to religious pluralization and religious pluralization is intertwined with religious relativization, then we can safely conclude that modernization leads to secularization. That's why I would suggest Peter L. Berger should recant his recantation of the secularization theory.²

Further Reading

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Detlef Pollack is Professor of Sociology of Religion at the University of Münster. This symposium is based on a conference held on April 10 and 11, 2015 under the auspices of the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University. Grateful acknowledgment is made to the Templeton Foundation for its generous support in making the conference possible.

² I am not the first one who made this suggestion. Steve Bruce (2001) came first.