

# Response by Detlef Pollack: Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociology of Religion?

*Translated from the German by Ruth Pauli*

Peter L. Berger is one of the few sociologists of religion in our time who has not only made contributions at the highest level of scientific discourse, but who, during the past decades, has also codetermined its profile to a high degree. His religious-sociological oeuvre of the 1960s and 1970s set the tone for the then-prevalent approach—the secularization theory. To this day, some exponents of the secularization theory, such as Steve Bruce or Frank Lechner, are influenced by him. All work done since then in the field of sociology of religion has been strongly affected by his thesis that religious concepts and practices gain their stability from the surrounding plausibility structure shared by the majority, and that their acceptance is eroded by the growing pluralism of religious options. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the economic market paradigm, even though it explicitly distinguishes itself from secularization theory, nonetheless also deals with this thesis.<sup>1</sup> In the judgement of Rodney Stark and his colleagues, the vitality of religion is not weakened but enhanced by the competition of various religious providers. They reverse Berger's argument: Where a single religious group holds a monopolistic position, it loses attractiveness; where many religious groups compete for the favor of religious consumers, the general level of religiousness is on the rise (Stark/Finke 2000).

Yet, it was not this argument that caused Peter L. Berger to abandon his position on secularization theory during the 1990's. Even after having recanted it, he still holds to his theory of undermining – the claim that growing plurality in the religious field undermines the social validity of religious convictions and withdraws their plausibility, which is taken for granted as long as these convictions are shared by the majority. As early as 2001, in a work edited by Linda Woodhead which discusses Berger's oeuvre both with criticism and with appreciation, he says: "I would say, I was wrong about secularization, but right about pluralism... What pluralism does...is to undermine all taken-for-granted certainties, in religion as in all other spheres of life" (Berger 2001: 194). In reality, it was not the competing hypothesis of market theoreticians that made him abandon the theory of secularization. Rather, it was the understanding of the unbroken

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<sup>1</sup> This is suggested by the arguments of Stephen Warner who, in his 1993 essay, attributed to market theory the status of a new paradigm. He explicitly identified the old paradigm with the early oeuvre of Peter Berger (Warner 1993: 1045).

vitality of religion, which, as he claimed, is as strong today as ever and is undiminished even by the undoubtedly dramatic changes brought about by modernization, technologization, and rationalization. “Religion has not been declining. On the contrary, in much of the world there has been a veritable explosion of religious faith” (Berger 2008: 23). Western Europe and the globally active cultural and intellectual elites could count as examples of religion’s loss of importance. However, they might both be exceptions in an otherwise passionately religious world. Berger considers the rise of Islam and the growth of dynamic Evangelicalism (especially in its Pentacostal version) as the most impressive evidence for what he diagnoses as religious explosion. His repudiation of secularization theory was induced, above all, by these religious risings.

One cannot but admire such intellectual radicalism and significance, when the leading exponent of a theory is willing to abandon it because, in his opinion, it proves to be wrong in the light of new empirical evidence. Such scientific honesty exists only rarely among members of the scientific community.

In his newly published text, however, Peter L. Berger once more modifies his position, proclaiming it with a fair amount of caution, contrary to his earlier theory, even with the caveat that his new ideas might one day be proven false. But even then, the fact that he has yet again corrected his course proves at least one thing: even in his old age, the master has not lost his intellectual flexibility. Now, almost twenty years later, Berger states that the theory which he then abandoned because he considered it untenable might not have been as wrong as he previously thought (p. XII). This is to say that modernity – exactly as the secularization theory claims – has indeed produced a secular discourse that enables people to deal with many areas of life without reference to any religious interpretations of reality (p. 51). This discourse is to be found not only in Western Europe or among intellectual elites, but also among ordinary believers all over the world. According to Berger, the theoreticians of secularity have made the mistake of assigning an exclusive position to this discourse and underestimating the capacity of people to live in different realms of reality – religious and secular – and to switch between them (p. 53). This mistake has even occurred among the critics of the secularization theory. For the majority of people, faith and secularity are not mutually exclusive modes of attending to reality but are complementary approaches to reality whose relation is not a matter of “either/or,” but rather of “both/and.” Thus it is not possible, in his estimation, to simply replace the secularization theory with the thesis of a return of the gods: It would be as senseless to uphold secularization theory in view of the vital religiousness in a modernizing world as to negate the plausibility of the evolution of an *imma-*

*ment frame*, which is neutral towards religion.<sup>2</sup> As to secularization theory, the insight was correct that an influential secular discourse had developed, which joined the religious discourse and even enjoyed a privileged position in society as well as in the minds of individuals. But it was wrong to assume that the secular discourse had pushed aside the religious worldview and could now have complete dominance over definitions of reality and value orientations. In contrast to the assumptions of secularization theory, modernization has not inevitably led to a complete secularization of society. Rather, the inevitable consequence of modernity has been the pluralization of worldviews and value systems. Following Berger, modernity thereby produces two kinds of pluralism: on the one hand, religious pluralism, consisting of a diversity of different religious traditions; and on the other hand, a pluralism of religious and secular discourses. Since both society and individuals are shaped by these discourses, the consequences of modernity underlying pluralization mold not only society but also the minds of individuals.<sup>3</sup> Thus Berger postulates a correlation between pluralization on the level of society, expressing itself in the differentiation of institutions such as science, administration, medicine, or technology, and the pluralization of individual consciousness (p. 35). Such a correlation, in his view, does not have to lead to complete accordance, but only to a certain mutual dependence.

In stating as much, Berger does not attempt to revoke his recantation of secularization theory; he merely changes it. It is not an about-face. You might call it a 90-degree turn. What do we gain from this course correction?

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<sup>2</sup> In stating as much, Berger adopts the argument of Charles Taylor (2007), though not without criticizing the book's title, "A Secular Age," as misleading; one could describe our age as being pluralist rather than secular (p. 73).

<sup>3</sup> Berger already assumed that social and mental changes corresponded. This thesis of correspondance distinguished his position from that of Thomas Luckmann, who, like Berger, assumed the differentiation and secularization of the social structure and the system of institutions once modern societies evolve, but always negated quite incomprehensibly a secularization of the individual mind. The churches' loss of relevance in society as a result of institutional specialization would not lead inevitably to an individual loss of faith en masse, Luckmann argued (1972: 11). Even when churches lose their anchoring in the holy cosmos and social institutions become increasingly secular, the individual stays religious (Luckmann 1991: 147f.). Berger, however, does not exempt the individual consciousness from the process of secularization: "As there is a secularization of society and culture, so there is a secularization of consciousness. Put simply, this means that the modern West has produced an increasing number of individuals who look upon the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations" (Berger 1969: 107f.).

First of all, Berger makes it clear that his abandoning of the presuppositions of secularization theory does not mean its reversal.<sup>4</sup> He does not plead for a theory of sacralization or resacralization. Modernity has secularizing effects, but they are limited (p. 76-77). Above all, they exist in the emergence of an immanent pattern of interpreting the world, which penetrates many social spheres, scientific analysis, jurisdiction, economic action, and also everyday life. Nonetheless, worlds of religious concepts, finite provinces of meaning, and rituals can certainly hold their ground. That is the very meaning of the pluralism of worldviews.

Further, Berger does not adopt the concept of a necessary interdependence between the constitutional conditions of modernity and the processes of secularization. Thus he takes into account an oft-repeated criticism of secularization theory.<sup>5</sup> Modernity does not inevitably bring forth secularization; neither does it lead to the ultimate disappearance of religion. Berger avoids any deterministic or teleological overtone. In fact, the interdependence of modernity and the emergence of a secular discourse is to be understood historically. This opens up the way to an empirical examination of the historically variable preconditions of the origin of this interdependence. One of the theories implicit in Berger's considerations might be that religious pluralism itself, being distinctive of modernity, has contributed to the emergence of a secular discourse because all of the conflicts resulting from the diversification of the religious, as they were fought out in the confessional wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, could only be solved by creating a religiously neutral realm, as Berger remarks.

If Berger is indeed right that the pluralization of worldviews and value systems is the central signum of our age, then the secularization approach, being above all an identification of the interdependence of religion and modernity, could be overcome – as is often demanded and attempted. This could be most effectively done by intensely debating the phenomenon of the pluralization of

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<sup>4</sup> That is what some sociologists of religion tend to do when trying to overthrow the secularization theory – for example, José Casanova not only observes deprivatization of religion contradicting secularization theory (Casanova 1994), but also denies, in his more recent works, the close connection of differentiation and secularization stated by secularization theory and instead emphasizes the contribution of religion to the evolution of modernity. In these works he even goes so far as to invert the underlying values of secularization theory: He replaces the modern esteem of Enlightenment and reason with an emphatic appreciation of Catholicism, and he replaces the criticism of religion with a criticism of European civilization as being intolerant, violent, and unreflected (Casanova 2008a, 2008b). For more details, see Pollack (2009: 5f.).  
<sup>5</sup> Critics of the deterministic, teleological, and unilinear character of the theory of secularization include Hans Joas (2007), Ulrich Beck (2008), Grace Davie (2002), and Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000).

worldview and religion. This debate has the potential to inherit the predominance once held by the theory of secularization. In that case, various questions will have to be discussed, such as the emergence of two pluralisms, their relationship to each other, the conditions for a co-existence of secular and religious discourse, and also their consequences and the ways to handle them in law, politics, and society. Also important is yet another question – What other relations between religious and secular discourse are imaginable and likely, apart from their co-existence: mutual exclusion, conflict, predominance of one over the other, subversion, mutual penetration, provincialization, isolation, persistence, revolutionary universalization? Furthermore, the discussion of the social, political, and jurisdictional conditions of different constellations and types of plurality, of the relationship of individual consciousness and social institutions as well as of culture and social structure, could be of interest. Berger's approach, based on pluralism theory, is undoubtedly a promising research agenda, which, though it still needs to be elaborated and developed, already proves stimulating in multiple ways. In spite of this potential, Berger's approach brings up critical questions that merit some discussion.

There are three issues that remain unconvincing in Peter L. Berger's reasoning as presented in this book. Firstly, it is difficult to comprehend whether in this new book Berger is actually still distancing himself from his earlier secularization theory. The core of Berger's earlier approach, based on secularization theory, was the assumption that religious homogeneity enhances the taken-for-granted validity of individual religious concepts and practices, and that religious diversity, on the other hand, undermines it. Berger still adheres to the theory of undermining: pluralism, he states, relativizes and undermines certainties (p. 10); by depriving religion of its taken-for-granted quality, pluralism fosters secularity (p. 20). Berger no longer holds the view that modernization necessarily leads to secularization (p. 20). According to Berger, this assumption is no longer acceptable in the light of developments in the technologically highly modernized USA or the modernizing states of Latin America and Asia, where an "explosion of passionate religious movements" is a prominent feature.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, he still claims in this new text that modernity and pluralism are inexorably intertwined: "modernity necessarily leads to pluralism" (p. 20). Today, pluralism is ubiquitous. In modernity, he says, people are increasingly exposed to the competition of differing convictions, values, and lifestyles. However, if modernization inevitably provokes pluralization, and pluralization undermines religious

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<sup>6</sup> There is a similar argument in Berger's previous work (2008: 10).

certainties, the consequence must be that modernization is accompanied by a weakening of religious convictions. This proposition is the core of any secularization theory. Berger will have to make a decision between abandoning the secularization theory or adhering to the theorem of undermining. Only if he also decided to abandon the theorem of undermining would he truly overcome secularization theory. But this he does not want to do; he cannot dispense with the theorem of undermining because it is at the core of his religious-sociological approach. This leads us to the conclusion that Berger, involuntarily, is much more committed to the secularization theory than he is ready to admit. His turn is probably greater than the assumed 90 degrees. Berger has abandoned the assumption that all processes attributed to modernity, whether rationalization, technologization, or the penetration of science in all spheres, minimize the importance of religion. But he has not abandoned – at least in his theoretical argumentation – the assumed necessity of the three steps leading from modernization to pluralization and finally to secularization.

However, this context of argumentation – which evidently is theoretically imposed, though not intended by Berger – raises another question: How does his theory of undermining relate to his claim that one can observe an explosion of religious faith all over the world, which would undeniably be accompanied by a pluralization of the religious field? Is Rodney Stark's economic market theory, according to which religious competition would increase the level of religiousness, correct after all? In order to settle this question, further reflection and empirical analysis are required.<sup>7</sup> Religiously diversified societies are probably especially religiously productive when their immanent religious pluralism is embedded in an all-embracing religious consensus in which it is mitigated and integrated. In a religiously saturated country like the USA, where practically everybody believes in God and is convinced that there is a life after death in which you are punished or rewarded for your earthly deeds, religious competition may inspire religious enthusiasm; in countries like the Netherlands or Great Britain, however, where the level of religious plurality is also very high but a strong religious framing is lacking, it might have a paralysing rather than a stimulating effect.

If this hypothesis contained even a grain of truth, you could perhaps reconcile Stark's market model with Berger's theory of undermining. In that case, you

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<sup>7</sup> There are already innumerable studies of the effects of religious pluralism on the level of religiousness. See the following authors, who hold to the economic market model: Stark/Finke (2000), Iannaccone (1992, 1994), and Froese/Pfaff (2001). The contrary position is held by Lechner (1996, 2004), Dobbelaere (2002), and Bruce (2002, 2011). An overview of the literature is offered in Olson (2008).

could possibly make the following generalization: Under the conditions of a society-wide religious consensus – even if very weak in content – religious competition increases religious enthusiasm, stimulates the religious “providers” to intensify their commitment, and stimulates the religious consumers to intensely search for the best “offer.” Given the cultural context, it is evident that everyone is following a religious preference – it just depends on where one thinks one’s religious needs are best satisfied. Under the conditions of a majoritarian secular culture, the plurality of different religious communities and interpretations of meaning is not effective in inspiring and motivating, but rather in relativizing and restricting. In this respect, Berger’s theory of the “heretical imperative” should perhaps be reconsidered. It is possible that the imperative to chose exists only in societies where being religious is taken for granted, no matter what form that might take. However, it seems to be very likely that in a widely secularized society many do not make a religious choice at all, leaving the question of the truth of faith untouched. In such a society, one needs no religion at all and does not have to decide on religious matters.

The second objection refers to Berger’s thesis of the co-existence of religious and secular discourse. Taking up the concepts of the finite provinces of meaning and the paramount reality – developed in the 1950s by Peter L. Berger’s teacher Alfred Schütz – Berger proposes that there are different finite provinces of meaning in human consciousness that can co-exist. In the same way one returns from the reality of a theater production (Berger’s example, p. 55) back to the reality of everyday life, and then leaves it again for, say, mathematical speculations, it should be possible to use different secular and religious codes and semantics, and to switch from one to the other. I will call this Berger’s compatibility theory. But is it possible to differentiate between secular and religious discourses by their semantic and mundane relevance structure in the same way as one differentiates between mathematical and aesthetic discourses or between erotic and political communications? A woman can be erotically attractive to a man, when on the occasion of a political discussion he discovers her beauty – to quote another of Berger’s examples. Her erotic attractiveness might even grow once the man discovers that they both share the same political convictions. However, it might also grow – and this is the end of the analogy to Berger’s example – when they find out that their political opinions are completely different. And it is possible that his desire does not depend at all on her political views. Political and erotic relevance structures can easily be distinguished, and sometimes it is wise (for the sake of love) not to relate them too closely.

There is no absolute guarantee that it is possible to differentiate between secular and religious discourses. Whether God is the world’s ultimate goal or life is without ultimate purpose, whether you believe in miracles or deny their

possibility, whether you believe that you need ritual practice and prayers to obtain happiness and salvation or you think that people forge their own destinies, these alternatives are hardly compatible. Erotic and political discourses belong to different worlds of meaning without necessarily influencing each other. In the case of religious and secular discourses, and even more so in the case of different religious discourses, there is a high probability that they compete against each other. This probability grows the more religions lay claim to a universal interpretation of the world, because in this case the probability of a mutual overlapping of the discourses also grows. Then they act in the same medium: in the medium of truth. The proposition that the dead will rise is not compatible with the proposition that death puts an end to everything; the belief in Jesus Christ as God's incarnation is not compatible with the belief that God is so different from anything earthly that God could never become a human being; the conviction that the Bible is true in its literal sense does not allow for historical-critical interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

Berger is aware of this objection. Does not religion, he asks (p. 58), claim an overall relevance which embraces all the others? Does not religion – as Paul Tillich wrote – embody “the ultimate concern” to which every other concern is secondary? Berger responds to this objection by opening up a differentiation of time: It may be that the ultimate concerns imply an overall relevance, the whole of human existence, the cosmos; however, this does not preclude that we put away the ultimate concerns for a while in order to attend to more mundane ones. To do so does not mean that the ultimate dimension is diminished or denied, but simply that at the moment we are occupied with other things. But are paramount reality and God's reality with its ultimate relevance really free of tension? Is it not possible that the everyday world fascinates us to such an extent that we gradually lose interest in the afterworld? In the perception of the everyday world, don't we follow a different logic than in the religious field? Does the everyday world not suggest a definition of reality that conflicts in both a hidden and an open way with the religious worldview, with all its assumptions about the

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**8** To make the point even clearer, it should be noted that the tensions between religious and secular worldviews described here are of merely modal character. They might occur, but not of necessity. It is absolutely conceivable that while attending a religious service or in a comparable situation, people use a religious code to communicate, whereas under different circumstances, like in their work surroundings, they use the secular code, and still they do not have the notion that these two forms of communication are contradictory. However, since many religions raise the claim of universality, there is a higher probability that religious discourses come into conflict with scientific, erotic, or political discourses than that erotic and scientific discourses, for instance, are at odds with each other.

beginning and end of the world, about the salvation of the world and human-kind? These questions become even more aggravating when one supposes, as Berger does, that secularized discourse enjoys a privileged status. In this case, the secular side's questions about the religious interpretations of the world will become all the more pressing.

Naturally, one can deal with concepts of salvation and the fate of the world that differ from one's own beliefs on a cognitive level – by downgrading them. When in the 19th century there was a mass immigration of Irish Catholics to Scotland, the Scottish Presbyterians did not have to question their faith. They could keep at a distance the Catholic faith of the Irish immigrants by developing demeaning stereotypes about them and by portraying them as uncultured, undisciplined idlers devoted to alcohol (Bruce 2001: 93). Berger and Luckmann call this process of handling definitions of reality differing from one's own symbolic universe “neutralization,” meaning “assigning an inferior ontological status...to all definitions existing outside the symbolic universe” (Berger/Luckmann 1966: 133). The neutralization results from either disqualifying the competing definition of reality from the discourse or subordinating it to one's own worldview, allowing that it might be partially true. If in fact you treat secular communication—influenced by science, technology, and politics—as privileged discourse, as Berger does, then you attribute to the religious discourses at best the status of a secondary language, which, on the part of primary codes and relevances, will be under the constant pressure of justification. It is not discernible how such a secondary language competing with the primary one can reach persistency and co-existence with the primary code without being challenged, and someday perhaps even overpowered, by the latter.

Berger finds his way out of this dilemma by arguing that the pluralism of discourses affects only the “how” of faith – that one has to live in a world with different definitions of reality and, therefore, any supposition about reality is riddled with doubt but does not affect the “what” of faith (p. 32). The content of faith, he says, does not change in the light of the plurality of competing systems of values and convictions, even if the “how” of faith has radically changed its character through experiencing this plurality. This argument is hardly convincing, as the contents of faith cannot so easily be detached from their form.

This brings me to my third objection. Empirical religious-sociological research has shown that in countries with a growing religious plurality, the contents of faith become increasingly vague, diffuse, and indetermined (Pollack 2009). In Western Europe (and, incidentally, also in the USA) there is a growing segment of people who no longer believe that the Bible is the word of God that has to be understood literally, but that it merely contains certain religious or essential life truths. A growing number of Western Europeans no longer imagine

God as a person, but as a higher power. On the question of life after death, they do not reflect in Christian terms by associating it with the resurrection of the dead or even of the flesh, but rather by adopting common concepts including the notion of the immortal soul, a belief in Heaven, or a belief in reincarnation. Above all, one implication of the growing plurality of the religious sphere is that the contents of faith become indetermined, and another is that, because it is impossible to make a choice between the many competing propositions of faith, one becomes increasingly indifferent about faith and leaves the query about truth unanswered. Holding on to the contents of one's faith despite increasing religious pluralism seems rather a minority position, found above all in closed communities. Religious concepts are especially distinguished by a high degree of plasticity. Perhaps no other sphere of society is as sensible to surroundings as the religious one.

Berger's considerations on religious pluralism prove to be stimulating. They take up traditional questions concerning the sociology of religion, such as the relation between religion and modernity, and they open up new perspectives for research. The classical thesis of the modernization theory is superseded by Berger's propositions on the theory of pluralism. The assertion that modernity necessarily leads to secularization is replaced by the presupposition that modernity inevitably comes along with a pluralism of religions and worldviews. This allows Berger to dissociate himself convincingly from the old theories of secularization, which posit a relation between rationalization, industrialization, urbanization, and secularization. At the same time, he is able to hold on to the repeatedly confirmed correlation between modernity and pluralization. Basically, Berger ascribes to a paradigm of differentiation theory,<sup>9</sup> which not only acts on the assumption of a pluralism of different religious orientations, but also assumes a pluralism of religious and secular discourses, which results from the former.

It has become clear that this approach is heavily biased toward a strengthening of the secularization theory, albeit in a fresh garment. This assumption is confirmed by the fact that, in the end, it turns out to be a differentiation theory, because in this assumed differentiation of religion and the secular, of religion and politics, of religion and science, or of religion and morals, many social scientists see the analytical core of the secularization theory (see Pollack 2013). Another proof for this assumption is Berger's argument that pluralism, as a feature

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<sup>9</sup> Not by accident Berger writes (p. 57): "This differentiation of reality into multiple relevance structures is a key feature of modernity, ultimately grounded in the immensely broad increase in the division of labor. If one wants, one can call the process secularization."

inseparable from modernity, has the effect of undermining the certainties of religious concepts. This argument is not compatible with the proposition of an undiminished religious vitality all over the world, assuming that the world is growing increasingly interconnected. This is also accompanied by the acceptance of partially secularizing effects of modernity when forming an *immanent frame*. The secular discourse, especially when enjoying a privileged status, puts growing plausibility pressure on the religious discourse. As Berger says, it is granted that religious and secular codes can co-exist. Nonetheless, they can be in a tenuous relation, which is often precisely the case. Finally, the compatibility of religion and secularity assumed by Berger is also endangered because, with the increasing plurality of worldviews and religions, not only the forms but also the contents of faith are changing, and – not least for the sake of their compatibility with secular definitions of reality – are becoming increasingly diffuse, common, and vague. All of these elements are strengthening the well-known assumptions of secularization theory.

Considering as much, should Peter L. Berger not decide to emphasize secularization theory in his future work more than he has already done in this book? Even if religious and secular definitions of the world might co-exist, and, to an even greater extent, erotic and political discourses might co-exist; even if one is not compelled to make a choice between various religious options; in science “either/or” prevails over “both/and.” In science, an acceptance of mutually exclusive statements cannot exist.

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