Peter Berger


Renowned sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, is well known for his work on secularization theory and just as famous for his rejection of it later in life. Berger continues to work out the role of global religious pluralism alongside realities of secular modernity in his most recent text, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*. Distilling many of his past arguments on dynamics of religious pluralism, modern secularism, and religious freedom, Berger seeks to construct a cohesive paradigm capable of providing a new foundation from which future academic study and social-political engagement might be built.

This most recent text consists of six chapters, digestible in two distinct portions. The first three chapters outline Berger’s understanding of the “pluralist phenomenon,” mapping its influence on both individual faith and religious institutions. The latter three chapters define Berger’s conception of “the secular discourse” and how secularity affects conceptions of modernity and political management of religious pluralism. Together, Berger attempts to reconcile modern secularism and religious plurality in the form of a dual-pluralist paradigm capable of negotiating both realities in a single public sphere. In this new construct, secularity is no longer the enemy of religion but a partner in protecting the integrity of personal faith and religious freedom via separation of church and state.

In his opening chapters, Berger defines pluralism as, “a social situation in which people with different ethnicities, worldviews, and moralities live together peacefully and interact with each other amicably.” Emphasizing the latter

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half of the definition, Berger argues that an authentic pluralism in society must consist of meaningful interactions amongst differences. By this definition, pluralism is not simply a “side-by-side” diversity where different groups co-exist in a common space: it must also include sustained, positive interaction over time. For Berger, these interactions amongst different worldviews and lifestyles necessitate “cognitive contamination” where differences inevitably influence all participants. The dynamics of cognitive contamination is twofold: “the first is that cognitive contamination relativizes; the second is that pluralism produces cognitive contamination as an ongoing condition.”\(^2\) This ongoing relativization of life then leads to two related dynamics: an increase in human capacity for “choice” vis-à-vis a rapid “de-institutionalization” of life. In other words, freedom of choice is necessarily accompanied by alienation from traditional institutional forms of thought and action.\(^3\)

This anxiety results in two possible receptions that Berger labels, “fundamentalism” and “relativism.” Following both options to their end, Berger argues, “Fundamentalism balkanizes a society, leading either to ongoing conflict or to totalitarian coercion. Relativism undermines the moral consensus without which no society can survive. The political problem of pluralism can only be solved by the maintenance and legitimacy of the middle ground between these two extremes.”\(^4\) Under the circumstances of modernity, Berger argues for the maintenance of religious freedom as a political imperative for peace and stability against fundamentalist totalitarianism and baseless relativism.

To achieve this end, Berger reframes and re-appropriates the role secularist discourse plays in modern societies. In his fourth chapter, Berger articulates his newest conception of dual pluralisms:

> If one is to understand the place of religion in the pluralist phenomenon, one must note that there are two pluralisms in evidence here: The first is the pluralism of different religious options co-existing in the same society ... The second is the pluralism of the secular discourse and the various religious discourses, also co-existing in the same society.\(^5\)

In positing these dual pluralisms, Berger rehabilitates secularization theory’s role in religious pluralism. He argues secular discourse should not be perceived as inherently anti-religious. Rather, it is a neutral discourse that necessarily

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\(^2\) Ibid., 2.
\(^3\) Ibid., 37.
\(^4\) Ibid., 15.
\(^5\) Ibid., 53.