ESSAY

GLOBAL PLURALISM AND RELIGION*

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Far from witnessing a decline in religion —it is argued in this article— what we see today in the contemporary world is a globalization of religious movements, some of which are highly dynamic. Modernity does not, therefore, necessarily lead to the end of religion, as held by the secularization theory. What it does lead to, more or less necessarily, is "religious pluralism."

In this essay, Peter Berger examines the consequences of the globalization of pluralism both to religious institutions as well as to the subjective consciousness of individuals. He also looks at the

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> possibilities for the success of fundamentalist or sectarian projects.
> Finally, he analyzes the relationship of different religious traditions
> to liberal democracy.

For some years now globalization has been *the* topic *du jour* of the chattering classes. There are now libraries of books about its economic and political implications. The literature on the cultural implications is less vast but considerable none the less. Yet the major fact at issue can be stated quite simply: Globalization means that everyone can talk to everyone else with astonishing ease. Pluralism has always meant that different groups have interacted with each other, be it willingly or not. Globalization simply means that such interaction has increased enormously both in scope and intensity. Religion is not an exception.

Arguably the two most dynamic religious movements in the contemporary world are resurgent Islam and popular Protestantism, the latter principally in the form of the Pentecostal movement. Both are truly global phenomena. Not only are Islamic movements interacting throughout the huge region from the Atlantic Ocean to the South China Sea, but the Muslim diaspora in Europe and North America has become a powerful presence. In England, for example, more people every week attend services in mosques than in Anglican churches. For understandable reasons attention has focussed on the most aggressive versions of this globalizing Islam, but it is moderate Muslims as well as practitioners of *jihhad* who talk to each other on the Internet and on cell phones, and who gather for both clandestine and public conferences. As to Pentecostalism, it has been spreading like wildfire through Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and parts of eastern Asia, and to such unlikely groups as European gypsies and hill tribes in India. David Martin, the British sociologist who has pioneered in the study of cross-national Pentecostalism, estimates that there are at least 250 million Pentecostals worldwide, and possibly much more. (A crucial case is China, where we know that the movement is spreading, but which is difficult to study because it is mostly illegal and therefore underground.)

However, globalizing religion is by no means limited to Islam and Protestantism. The Roman Catholic church has always been a global institution, but globalization is profoundly altering its international profile: Increasingly its areas of strength are outside its traditional European heartland, with the interesting consequence that precisely those of its features that trouble progressive Catholics in, say, the Netherlands are an

attraction in the Philippines or in Africa. (The Vatican is well aware of this fact, which explains many of its policies.) The Russian Orthodox Church, presiding over a strong religious revival in the post-Soviet era and enjoying the favor of the Putin government, is flexing its muscles in the Balkans and the Middle East, not to mention what the Russians call the "near abroad".

Chassidic movements with headquarters in Brooklyn, New York, are sending missionaries to Israel and to Jewish communities in eastern Europe. The so-called "Jesus Movie", a film produced by an American Evangelical organization and synchronized in well over a hundred languages, is being screened by aggressive missionaries in villages throughout India, despite the outrage of pious Brahmins and the opposition of the Indian government. But Hinduism is returning the compliment. Devotees dance and chant in praise of Krishna in major American and European cities. Hindu missionary organizations (ranging from the sedate Vedanta Society to the exuberant Sai Baba movement) are busily evangelizing wherever they can. Similarly, Buddhist groups with headquarters in Japan, Taiwan and southeast Asia are attracting sizable numbers of converts in Western countries.

If one is to get an intellectual handle on these developments, it is important to put away a view which, despite massive evidence to the contrary, is still very widespread (not least among Christian theologians): It is the view (often called "secularization theory") that modernity brings about a decline of religion. Simply put, this view has been empirically falsified. This is not the place to enlarge upon the debates that have ranged over "secularization theory" in recent years. Suffice it to say that, contrary to the theory, the contemporary world, far from being secularized, is characterized by a veritable explosion of passionate religion. (There are two exceptions to this statement —western and central Europe— and a thin but influential class of "progressive" intellectuals in most countries. Again, the reasons for these exceptions cannot be discussed here.)

Modernity does not necessarily lead to a decline of religion. What it does lead to, more or less necessarily, is religious pluralism. Modern developments —mass migration and travel, urbanization, literacy and, most important, the new technology of communication— have brought about a situation in which different religious traditions are present to each other in a historically unprecedented manner. For obvious reasons this interaction is facilitated under conditions of legally protected religious liberty. But even where governments, in various degrees, try to limit or surpress religious pluralism (as is the case in China, India and Russia), this is difficult to do under contemporary conditions.

Let me just give a personal example: A couple of years ago I visited Buenos Aires for the first time. I had long been enamored of the writings of Borges, and I was anticipating a rather romantic encounter with the world of the tango. As my taxi left the airport, the first sight that greeted me was a huge Mormon church, with a gilded Angel Moroni sitting atop its steeple. Here was an outpost of a religion born in upstate New York, which until recently had barely spread beyond Utah and certainly not beyond the United States. Today Mormonism has been experiencing impressive growth in many countries, notably (of all places) in the South Pacific and in Siberia. There are now large numbers of people throughout the world whose spiritual, intellectual and social center is Salt Lake City.

Religious pluralism has both institutional and cognitive implications. It is important to understand both. Institutionally it means that something like a religious market is established. This does not mean that concepts of market economics can be unambiguously applied to the study of religion (as has been done, very interestingly, by Rodney Stark and other American sociologists, with the use of so-called "rational choice theory"). But what it does mean is that religious institutions must *compete* for the allegiance of their putative clientele. This competition naturally becomes more intense under a regime of religious liberty, when the state can no longer be relied upon to fill the pews. This situation inevitably affects the behavior of religious institutions, even if their theological self-understanding is averse to such changed behavior.

The clergy (using this term broadly for the officials of religious institutions) now face a rather inconvenient fact: Since their authority is no longer a social given, they must seek to re-establish it by means of *persuasion*. This gives a new social role to the laity. No longer a subject population, the laity becomes a community of consumers whose notions, however objectionable on theological grounds, must be seriously addressed.

The Roman Catholic case is paradigmatic in this respect. It is fair to say that, of all Christian churches, the Roman church has the most impressive hierarchical structure, which in many ways is at the core of its self-understanding. As far as the relevant doctrine is concerned, this has not fundamentally changed, though it has been modified by the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent papal encyclicals. Yet the *behavior* of the church toward its lay members has changed significantly. Some Catholics have gone so far as to describe the present time as the era of the laity in the church. This may be an exaggeration, but clearly the laity has become more assertive. The past few

months have offered an impressive example of this in Boston (once called the "holy city" of American Catholicism). The archdiocese, under severe financial pressure because of the huge payments made to alleged victims of clerical sexual abuse, decided to close a number of parishes. The lay people of the parishes rose in rebellion in a way not seen before, respectfully but firmly opposing the archbishop. As of the time of this writing, he rescinded the decision to close two of the parishes.

The pluralistic situation also changes the relations of religious institutions with each other. Participants in a market, religious or other, not only compete but are frequently engaged in efforts to reduce or regulate the competition. Obviously attempts are made in the educational activities of religious institutions to discourage their members from going over to competitors.

For example, American Judaism has made great efforts to immunize Jews against Christian missionary activities. But competing religious institutions also negotiate with each other to regulate the competition. This helps to clarify at least some of the phenomenon known as "ecumenicity": Ecumenical amity among Christian churches means, at least in part, explicit or implicit agreements not to poach on each other's territory.

Until a few decades ago such a negotiating process among American Protestant churches was known as "comity". Protestant denominations portioned out certain areas for their outreach activities, allocating a particular area to, say, the Presbyterians; the others then promised to stay out of this area. This reached a somewhat bizarre climax in Puerto Rico, of all places, where the mainline denominations divided up the entire island in this way. If you knew that someone was, say, a Presbyterian, you could guess which town he came from. Some Evangelical Protestants did not participate in this "comity", much to the annoyance of other Protestants. The term has fallen into disuse, but it is still a very significant reality and now goes beyond the Protestant fold. Mainline Protestants and Catholics do not actively proselytize each other, and neither seek to proselytize Jews. Indeed, the very word "proselytization" has acquired a pejorative meaning in American religious discourse and those who continue to practice it are looked at askance. Thus there was an outpouring of protests when not long ago the Southern Baptist Convention (the largest Evangelical denomination in the United States) announced that it would continue its program to convert Jews. Sociologically speaking, one could say that today "comity" is informally extended to every religious group in the United States that does not engage in blatantly illegal behavior.

Religious pluralism also has important implications for the subjective consciousness of individuals. This can be stated in one sentence: Religion loses its taken-for-granted status in consciousness. No society can function without some ideas and behavior patterns being taken for granted. For most of history religion was part and parcel of what was taken for granted. Social psychology has given us a good idea of how taken-for-grantedness is maintained in consciousness: It is the result of social consensus in an individual's environment. And for most of history most individuals lived in such environments. Pluralism undermines this sort of homogeneity. The individual is ongoingly confronted with others, who do *not* take for granted what was so taken traditionally in his community. He must now *reflect about* the cognitive and normative assumptions of his tradition, and consequently he must *make choices*. A religion that is chosen, on whatever level of intellectual sophistication, is different from a religion that is taken for granted. It is not necessarily less passionate, nor do its doctrinal propositions necessarily change. It is not so much the *what* as the *how* of religious belief that changes. Thus a modern Catholic may affirm the same doctrines and engage in the same practices as his ancestors in a traditional Catholic village. But he has decided, and must continue to decide, to so believe and behave. This makes his religion both more personal and more vulnerable. Put differently, religion is subjectivized and religious certitude is more difficult to come by.

In one of my books I have described this process as the "heretical imperative" (from the Greek word *hairesis*, which means, precisely, "choice"). This process occurs not only in "liberal" or "progressive" religious groups. It also occurs in the most militantly conservative groups, for there too individuals have *chosen* to be militantly conservative. In other words, there is a mountain of difference between traditional and *neo*-traditional religion. Psychologically, the former can be very relaxed and tolerant; the latter is necessarily tense and has at least an inclination toward intolerance.

Needless to say, these developments are not unique to religion. They affect all cognitive and normative definitions of reality, and their behavioral consequences. I have long argued that modernity leads to a profound change in the human condition, *from fate to choice*. Religion participates in this change. Just as modernity inevitably leads to greater individuation, so modern religion is characterized by individuals who reflect upon, modify, pick and choose from the religious resources available to them. The French sociologist Daniele Hervieu-Leger has called this phenomenon "*bricollage*" (loosely translatable as "tinkering", as in putting

together the pieces of a Lego game); her American colleague Robert Wuthnow uses the term "patchwork religion". The American language has a wonderfully apt term for this – "religious preference" – tellingly a term derived from the world of consumption, carrying the implication that the individual decided upon this particular religious identity and that in the future he might make a different decision.

Putting together the institutional and the subjective dimensions of pluralism, we can arrive at a far-reaching proposition: *Under conditions of pluralism all religious institutions, sooner or later, become voluntary associations – and they become so whether they like it or not.*

Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch classically analyzed two protoypical social forms of religion —the "church", into which one is born, and the "sect", which one decides to join. Richard Niebuhr suggested that American religion invented a third type, the "denomination", which he defined as a church that recognizes the right of other churches to exist, be it *de jure* or *de facto*. One could then say that, in the course of American religious history, all religious groups have become "denominationalized". Even Judaism, despite its distinctive merging of religious and ethnic identity, split into at least three denominations in America (and, depending on how one counts, several more). But the process of "denominationalization" is no longer limited to the United States. As pluralism spreads globally, all religious groups become in fact voluntary associations, even if they have to be dragged into this social form kicking and screaming. Not surprisingly, some of them will perceive pluralism as a lethal threat and will mobilize all available resources to resist it.

A simple conclusion follows from the preceding considerations: The capacity of a religious institution to adapt successfully to a pluralist environment will be closely linked to its capacity to take on the social form of the voluntary association. And that, of course, will be greatly influenced by its preceding history. If this is understood, then Protestantism clearly has what may be called a comparative advantage over other religious traditions (Christian or not). Both the Lutheran and the Calvinist Reformations, in their emphasis on the conscience of the individual, have an *a priori* affinity with modern individuation and thus with the pluralist dynamic. But not all Protestant groups have had the same capacity to organize themselves as voluntary associations.

David Martin has recently suggested that three types of relations between religion and society developed in the post-medieval history of western Christianity (the case of eastern Orthodoxy is different). The first type he calls the "baroque counter-Reformation", which sought to maintain

or re-establish a harmonious unity between church, state and society. It flourished in the *ancien regime* of Catholic Europe and, following the French Revolution, morphed into the republic understood as a sort of secular (*laique*) church. In both its sacred and secular versions, this type has great difficulties with pluralism. The second type he calls "Enlightened absolutism", characteristic of Lutheran northern Europe and the Anglican establishment. It became gradually more tolerant of pluralist diversity and eventually morphed into the north-European welfare state. And thirdly there is what Martin nicely labels as "the Amsterdam-London-Boston bourgeois axis", which may be seen as the matrix of religious pluralism. But, again, not all three points on this axis have been equally hospitable to voluntary association. Dutch pluralism flourished under a famously tolerant regime, but its diverse religious groups (Calvinist, Arminian, Catholic) became rather rigidly solidified as "pillars" (*verzuiling*) of an overarching political establishment. In England there occurred a more ample flourishing of diverse religious groups – the wide spectrum of so-called Nonconformity – but, as already indicated by this name, it did so under the shadow of the Anglican state church. It was in the English-speaking colonies in what became the United States that religious pluralism attained its most unconstrained and exuberant version, giving birth to the denomination as the religious voluntary association *par excellence*. Naturally enough, American society has ever since been the vanguard of both religious and secular pluralism.

The comparative advantage of Protestantism continues today. The amazing cross-national success of Pentecostalism and other forms of popular Protestantism can in no small measure be explained by a distinctive capacity to operate as voluntary associations. But a religious group need not be Protestant to be able to reorganize itself denominationally, even if, so to speak, it does help to be Protestant. I have already mentioned post-Vatican-II Catholicism and American Judaism as cases in point. Other cases can be found far from the Judaeo-Christian world. The upsurge of Buddhist and other religious movements in Japan since the 1950s (one author called it "the rush hour of the gods") has been largely carried by voluntary lay organizations. Hinduism has generated similar organizations since the reform movements of the nineteenth century. The largest Muslim organizations in the world, Nadhatul-Ulama and Muhammadiya in Indonesia, are also voluntary lay movements, and there are similar organizations in other Islamic countries.

I have mentioned the "heretical imperative". Perhaps we could use another concept —the "voluntary imperative". It imposes itself wherever

religious pluralism comes to predominate. Catholic observers have coined the term "Protestantization" to refer, usually pejoratively, to recent changes in their church. Stripped of its pejorative undertone, it is rather an apt term. Sometimes it describes doctrinal changes, most of which need not concern us here. But the term is most apt in describing social changes within the church —to wit, the role of an increasingly assertive laity, the transformation of the church into a *de facto* denomination, and one doctrinal change that is definitely relevant here— the theological undergirding of the norm of religious liberty. It is notable that the two individuals who were most influential in the affirmation of this norm by the Second Vatican Council came from the two homelands of modern democracy —Jacques Maritain from France and John Courtney Murray from the United States.

Americans in particular are prone to view the aforementioned developments as inexorable and irreversible —modernity generates pluralism, which generates the voluntary association, which then functions as a school for democracy. Eventually something like the New England town meeting will become a universal social and political norm. Alas, the empirical reality is more complicated. There are indeed pressures toward such a sociological trajectory. But the outcome of these pressures is not a foregone conclusion. There are possibilities of resistance and, under the right circumstances, the pressures can be defeated and the trajectory reversed.

Resistances to pluralism have been conventionally subsumed under the category of "fundamentalism". I'm uneasy about this term; it comes from a particular episode in the history of American Protestantism and is awkward when applied to other religious traditions (such as, for example, Islam). I will use it, because it has attained such wide currency, but I will define it more sharply: *Fundamentalism is any project to restore taken-for-grantedness in the individual's consciousness and therefore, necessarily, in his social and/or political environment*. Such a project can have both religious and secular forms; the former concerns us here.

Religious fundamentalism can be more or less ambitious. In its more ambitious form it seeks to reshape the entire society in its image. In recent history the last (so far) Christian version of this was the ideal of the Nationalists in the Spanish civil war —the ideal of a Catholic *reconquista* of Spain from the supposedly anti-Christian secularism of the republic. It was the last flowering of the "counter-Reformation baroque". It collapsed with the Franco regime which intended to realize it, and today it is inconceivable that the Roman Catholic church would again give its blessing to any

comparable project. Nor are there other Christian analogues. (The notion, current in progressive circles today, that the Christian Right in America has such intentions has little basis in the facts. No politically significant group in American Evangelicalism intends to set up a theocratic regime, and fundamentalism as I have defined it has its adherents both on the Left and on the Right of the political spectrum in the United States.) But fundamentalist projects abound in the non-western world.

There are sizable groupings in Russia who would like to set up a regime in which, once again, there would be a unity between church and state (a radical version of what in Orthodox political thought has been called *sinfonia*). Influential groups in Israel would reshape that society with its entire political structure based on religious law, as a *halachic* state. Even more influential groups in India would replace its secular constitution with Hindutva, understood as a coercive Hinduism imposed on all citizens, including the large Muslim minority. And most importantly today, Islamist ideology seeks a theocratic state based on Islamic law, a *shari'a* state imposed on the entire society. In its most ambitious version, this is the *jihhadist* dream of a renewed caliphate embracing the entire Muslim world (and conceivably also lands that were once Muslim, notably the Balkans and "Al Andalus").

The chances for success of such projects vary from country to country. But it is possible to formulate one necessary condition for a successful realization: *To convert an entire society into a support structure (what I would call a "plausibility structure") for a renewed taken-for-granted consensus, it will be necessary to establish a totalitarian regime*. That is, the theocratic state will have to fully control all institutions in the society and, crucially, all channels of interaction and communication with the outside world. Under modern conditions this is very difficult, unless one wants to pay the price of catastrophic economic stagnation. The developments in Iran since the establishment of the Islamist regime clearly demonstrate the difficulty. It would be mistaken, though, to conclude that any project of religious totalitarianism is impossible. A regime willing to use ruthless and continuous repression, and indifferent to the material misery of its subject, could yet pull such a project off.

The less ambitious form of religious fundamentalism is the sectarian one. It seeks to restore taken-for-grantedness in a subculture under its control, while the rest of society is, as it were, abandoned to the enemy. It is within the subculture that the individual can find the social consensus needed for cognitive and normative certainty. This, of course, has always been characteristic of sects. But in a society marked by pluralism the

controls over interaction and communication with the outside have to be very rigorous indeed. The slightest relaxation of these controls can breach the protective dam against the pluralistic infection, alternative definitions of reality will then flood in and the precariously maintained taken-for-grantedness can collapse overnight. Therefore, the denizens of the subculture must limit contacts with outsiders to a minimum, avoid all unnecessary conversation, and equally avoid all media of communication originating in the pluralistic world outside. In other words, what must be established and maintained is a kind of mini-totalitarianism.

The sectarian project is thus not without its own serious difficulties, but these are less onerous than those confronting a project of *reconquista*. There are a good number of successful cases, in different religious traditions. Ideally for success, the fundamentalist group must have a territory, however small, under its control. This can be an isolated community (such as the Davidic compound in Waco, Texas), a circumscribed urban community (such as the ultra-Orthodox communities in Brooklyn or Mea Shearim in Jerusalem), a monastic or quasi-monastic center (there are, of course, many of these in the Christian orbit), or an even larger geographical base (such as areas of northern Nigeria under Islamist control). But sectarian subcultures can also function without a territorial location, as long as the controls over interaction and communication are rigorously maintained. There are numerous examples of this in every major religious tradition.

Both society-wide totalitarianism and sectarian mini-totalitarianism constitute difficult projects under modern conditions. The second is a better bet in terms of possible success. *Reconquista* totalitarianism is incompatible with pluralism, indeed must be implacably hostile to it. Mini-totalitarianism is compatible with pluralism, but only to the extent that it accepts the pluralistic dominance in the larger society as long as its own sub-society is kept intact.—

I have tried, as best as I could, to describe the globalization of pluralism and its consequences for religion. The description does not in itself supply a judgment as to whether this empirical reality is a good or a bad thing. One's religious and/or political values will have to enter into any such judgments. I will, albeit briefly, come clean on this point. I will be very brief on the religious evaluation: I am a theologically liberal Lutheran. As such, not only do I feel unthreatened by religious pluralism, but I welcome it. Pluralism undermines taken-for-grantedness in matters of belief. In that characteristic, contemporary pluralism strongly resembles the religious

situation prevalent in the late Hellenistic world into which Christianity first came. I don't see why one should deplore a situation like the one in which the Apostle Paul carried out his missionary activity. Philosophically, I don't understand why a faith that is chosen voluntarily should be inferior to a faith (if it can be called that) which is taken for granted as one takes for granted one's musical ability, hair color or propensity to hayfever. Indeed, I would propose the opposite.

A political evaluation will have to follow a somewhat different logic. Once again coming clean myself, I have (for, I think, very good empirical reasons) a strong normative bias in favor of liberal democracy (I should add, without having utopian illusions about it). The question then becomes the degree to which different religious traditions relate not only to pluralism but to liberal democracy. (The two are not necessarily linked. Religious diversity can be tolerated under authoritarian regimes, *vide* the tolerant policies of Enlightened rulers like Joseph II of Austria and Frederick the Great of Prussia, or of the Ottoman empire in its better days. And democratically established regimes can quickly become illiberal, in religion as in everything else.)

It is important to see that the political stance of a religious tradition is not necessarily inert over time. The Roman Catholic case is very instructive in this regard. Within little more than a century the Roman church moved from intense hostility to liberal democracy to its endorsement on theological grounds, and consequently to political actions which were of strategic importance in transitions to democracy in Latin America, southern and central Europe, and the Philippines. I don't think that there is any major religious tradition which is intrinsically unable to go through a similar change.

Yet again it would seem that Protestantism has a comparative advantage in this matter, notably those Protestant groups that derive from the "Amsterdam-London-Boston bourgeois axis". And, as I have argued earlier, this affinity with pluralism and democracy is not primarily a matter of Protestant doctrine, but rather the result of the Protestant propensity to organize itself in the form of the voluntary association. Thus I think that Martin is correct in seeing the global explosion of popular Protestantism as a phenomenon favorable to democracy (and, not coincidentally, to the development of a market economy). This cannot be said about the Islamic resurgence as of now. It has been said that what is needed is an Islamic Luther. That is probably a misleading metaphor. In terms of a theological rationale for democracy, what is rather needed is an Islamic John Courtney Murray. There are potential candidates for such a role (though none as yet,

as far as I know, of Murray's stature) —in Indonesia, in Turkey, in the Muslim diaspora in western countries, and even in the Arab world and in Iran.

Every religious person will at times have difficulties with democracy, when a democratic regime legislates in violation of deeply held religious norms. The opposition of conservative Christians and Jews to laws favoring abortion or same-sex marriage may serve as a timely illustration. I think that acceptance of liberal democracy is more difficult for traditions which contain a sacred law affecting every aspect of social life. The debates in Israel over the relation of *halacha* to the law of the state, and the remarkably similar debates in the Islamic world over the status of the *sharia* in political society, illustrate this difficulty very clearly. It is all the more important to know that, in both cases, there are very serious attempt to resolve this question in a way compatible with liberal democracy.

There are no inevitable scenarios in history. Given my own religious and political values, I believe that global pluralism is good for religion and good for democracy. I find comfort in the sociological analysis which shows the difficulties facing any totalitarian project, be it of the more or the less ambitious sort. With all due respect for various catastrophic possibilities, I think that there are grounds for restrained optimism. ☐