

Peter Berger's Approach to the Conflict Between Religious and Secular Society

A Few Thoughts About Religious Naturalism

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

Swenson ("Society, Spirituality and the Sacred – A Social Scientific Introduction" (Broadview Press) (1999)) at pp. 347 – 384 summarizes the academic literature with regard to the secularization of society, including various ways in which the tension between science and other secular forces and institutional religion have been described. While creating a useful synthesis, he could not avoid treating us to a dizzying display of the scholarly propensity to create language and taxonomy to describe the similar if not identical phenomena.

One of the scholars whose thought Swenson reviews is Peter Berger. Berger builds on some of Max Weber and others' foundational concepts related to religion's changing role in society. After summarizing various ways in which religion has been marginalized by forces of secularization, Berger observes three responses at work in the religious community, as follows: The deductive; the reductive; and the inductive. I note, showing the same itch the results of which Swenson highlighted, that Berger's labels could easily be improved.

The Deductive

This amounts to a reaffirmation of the religious tradition. It is neo-orthodoxy, fundamentalism, retrenchment, etc. As Karen Armstrong has pointed out in "The Battle for God", each of the major religious faiths have shown increasing signs of this tendency during the past several decades.

The Reductive

This acknowledges science and philosophy as humanity's most authoritative guides, thus radically diluting religious authority. Theologians of this bent accommodate their religious views to secular authorities by using two primary tools, "cognitive bargaining" and "translating". Cognitive bargaining amounts to deliteralizing or metaphorizing what was traditionally assumed to be literal. That is, the Virgin Birth and Resurrection are important symbols, not real events. Translating involves what Berger terms the conversion of the "transcendent" into the "immanent". That is, religion is not about a relationship to a "sacred" force external to human beings, but rather is about identifying, understanding and relating to forces internal to human individual and groups. This involves interpreting old terms (often with traditional, literal meanings) in new (often metaphoric) ways. I thought of words like "religious", "spiritual", "sacred" in their religious naturalism (see www.religiousnaturalism.com) context as I read this.

The Inductive

This is the movement from tradition or ideology to experience, which ironically is to walk back up the path religion has walked. Anciently, religion was more about experience than belief. The ascendancy of ideology within religion is a relatively recent phenomenon. In his inductive approach, Berger follows the lead of Friedrich Schleiermacher who took human experience as the starting point of religious reflection and considered revelation to be every new or original

disclosure of the cosmos to the innermost consciousness of the person. So, one begins with the widest variety of these experiences (as la William James, who was influenced by Schleiermacher) and induces from that what is common and so assumed to be most important. This induction is never complete, in part because human experience continues to change and in part because there is will always be new ways to interpret old experience. However, individuals and institutions often perceive induction to have done its job, or are not aware that a process is underway.

Berger's Synthesis

Berger believes that the inductive option provides the best way forward. Deduction, he believes, is a step backwards that shuts out much of the good modernity and post modernity have to offer. Reduction, he believes, often unnecessarily desecralizes human experience. Induction, he says, better preserves sacred experience and facilitates a process that will allow religious experience and institutions to change as the human condition and shape of human society changes from time to time and place to place.

Berger also concludes that the modern world has freed, and so ironically at the same time, isolated humans in new ways. We are thus put in a position to make decisions outside the monopolistic reach of religious institutions while understanding that sacred "reality" (in Otto's "mysterium tremendum" and "fascinadus" sense) and our subjective complex of wishes and desires are separate phenomena. Berger says that it is our connection to the permanent, sacred stratum of reality that carries us through the uncertainty of modern life. I infer that in his view this is where we find our most important meanings. Berger says that we cannot connect to the sacred sufficiently as individuals, and hence there is a continuing important role for religious institutions to provide the small group association that we need for other purposes, and a "plausibility structure" (justification by apparent authority) for our experience with the sacred.

My Commentary

Berger's analysis is helpful in terms of identifying different segments of the religious marketplace that will respond differently to what Religious Naturalism (RN) has to offer. As noted below, this is complicated by the fact that each tradition, denomination and congregation will have representatives from each segment within it. And even in individual believers we will find elements of each form of thought described above. It will be more a question of which is dominant over which aspects of the individual's belief system.

I see the inductive approach as more an extension of the reductive than a separate category. That is, the inductive approach will also accept science and other secular sources of interpreting experience as authoritative. I observe that the older a tradition is the more likely it is to have incorporated inductive elements. For example, of the religious traditions I know Judaism is the most "praxis" (practise as opposed to belief) oriented and the least theologically inclined. Its stories are also the oldest and hence easiest to metaphorize. And its history has humbled its theology, for the most part. However, a review of the Midrash (among other things) shows that this has not always been the case, and there are parts of the contemporary Jewish community that still take theology very seriously. And at the other end of the spectrum we have my friend Rabbi Oler of Chicago and his association of Jewish humanist/atheist/RN synagogues. Much of Catholicism, despite protestations from the top, is also more praxis than ideological. Others could perhaps comment regarding how the Eastern traditions run along this axis.

The important distinction for those interested in encouraging the acceptance of RN is that between the deductive v. reductive/inductive. This is, as just noted, because the deductionists have surrendered much less authority to science and other secular sources of knowledge than have the reductionists/inductionists. The deductionists seek to turn back the clock (or keep it from advancing) in terms of who has authority to speak with regard to various matters. So, the critical question to address in deciding how to approach a particular person or group is likely, "How deductive are they, and about which issues?" Selling RN in the deductive market will be much trickier than elsewhere. That topic is complex enough that I won't broach it here.

Adding the inductive to the reductive approach is, in my view, relatively easy for the reasons noted above. And I see RN as particularly well suited to doing that. This is, largely, how I interpret Ursula Goodenough's book "The Sacred Depths of Nature". In addition to reductively "translating" some religious terms, it brings a new-to-many-people understanding of evolutionary biology that sacralizes our perception of ourselves, life in general and physical reality in precisely the sense Berger indicates. It assumes an immanent perspective to the sacred while encouraging sacred feelings through the contemplation of the miracle that is life in the context of reality as we are now justified to apprehend it. In this sense, it can be understood as doing little more than helping us to better understand the scope of the immanence sacred. This is why Ursula's version of the RN message is so welcome in certain quarters. It helps people with a reductive point of view to resacralize. And since Ursula would threaten those who resist the authority of science, and hence I don't hear of her being invited to Evangelical congregations.

This analysis has helped me to understand something that has long puzzled me about Mormonism and that I believe is central to understanding how to deal with the deductive faiths in general. Mormonism is mostly deductive in a sense, but it is not really "neo-orthodox" because it is young enough never to have been anything but orthodox. However, Mormonism has dealt with many issues over the years that have forced it to deliteralize certain of its beliefs, and it is at present beginning to grapple with the deliteralization of its core mythology – that related to Joseph Smith and The Book of Mormon. Within Mormonism, however, deliteralization has never moved from the academic fringe into the mainstream and where accepted has been largely treated as a kind of secret gnosis – a "meat" for which the masses are not ready. Recently, signs of the inductive approach have also appeared within the Mormon intellectual fringe and are also Gnostic in the sense just indicated. It is my view that many of Mormonism's highest leaders are aware that the reductive and inductive process is underway and recognize it as necessary to a degree since many Mormon myths are young enough that they can be falsified in the scientific sense. So reduction and induction may be the lesser of evils in some cases, as they have been found to be by large branches of Christianity. However, Mormon leaders are trying to manage this process so that they minimize their loss of their influence. They are doing many things in this regard. I won't bore you here with examples. Suffice it to note that as long as they are helped to hang onto their congregants, they will be much less inclined to resist what RN has to offer while not going out of their way to preach it from the pulpit.

While I liked most of Berger's analysis, from what I read it overemphasized both the permanence and importance of sacred "reality". While humans share a common tendency to feel what scholars like Schleiermacher, Durkheim, Otto and James have so well described, the nature of the sacred experience in my view radically changes once we shift from a transcendent to an immanent perspective. Berger hits this nail on the head when he described the feeling of freedom, power and "aloneness" that accompanies modernity, and then he somehow returns to the essence of the "sacred" experience as his social and individual lynchpin. Perhaps I just don't understand him yet, but what so far what I have understood does not work for me. And in

my view, secular experience in parts of Europe and Canada indicate that people adjust to their loss of traditional conceptions of the “sacred other” and having done so, regard those as bizarre impositions.

I would prefer to adjust Berger’s analysis (as I understand it from what is admittedly no more than a survey of his thought) to include reference to another kind of reality – objective physical and social reality as we are justified from time to time in apprehending them. This understanding So, I would modify Berger’s final synthesis as follows.

We understand that there is a difference between the objective physical and social reality of which we are a part and our subjective complex of perceptions, wishes and desires. Our journey through the uncertainty of modern life is stabilized by our understanding, refined by as many well-tested points of view as possible, that:

- we are interconnected to that reality
- these interconnections inspire in us feelings that we have in common to large degree with all of humanity, including wonder, reverence and terror, as reality unfolds in understandable as well as inscrutable ways before us;
- our actions have profound short and long term effects on those we love, all other life forms of which we are aware, and many other aspects of physical reality; and
- a concerted effort is now required of us if we wish to preserve life as we know it.

We recognize our heritage as small group animals and hence acknowledge our need for companionship and in particular, sharing our most important meanings and purposes with other humans outside of our families. We also acknowledge our hierarchical nature and hence inclination toward authority. Thus, we recognize the role of social (including religious) institutions in providing a structure and “plausibility structure” within which we can have some of our most meaningful experiences.

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