



Photos by
Timothy Clark.

CONVERSATIONS

“Christians Should Be Happy About Pluralism”

A Conversation with Peter L. Berger

*Austrian-American sociologist Peter L. Berger is the author of numerous books on sociological theory, the sociology of religion, and global development, which have been translated into dozens of foreign languages. His latest book is *The Many Altars of Modernity: Towards a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*. Berger sat down with *The Wheel's* Inga Leonova to discuss the contemporary intersection of secular and religious discourse, problems of religious intolerance and conflict, and his thoughts on Orthodox Christianity. Cyril Hovorun and Robert Arida prepared interview questions.*

Secularization and Religiosity

A recent study by the Pew Research Center, America's Changing Religious Landscape, indicates a decline in the number of Americans who identify themselves with major organized churches. Does this decline make you uncomfortable? Were you correct when you advocated the theory of secularization, or when you renounced it?

Was I right when I advocated the theory of secularization? No. I decided it was empirically untenable. The question is, who are the “nones?” We know a little bit about this, and the idea that it is a wave of atheism is absurd. Pew has found that something like 75 percent of Americans pray every day, believe in God, believe in life after death. This is not an atheist group.

I think there are two meanings to this. One thing that comes out in some of the questionnaire responses is that there is a kind of “Asian” spirituality involved: people who want to discover their inner child (heaven help them), be at one with nature, things of that sort. That's probably a minority of the “nones.” Most of them are simply people who don't feel comfortable in the church or religious community to which they used to belong. And so, when asked, “What is your religious affiliation?” they are “nones.” If you asked me, I would have to answer that my affiliation is “none” at the moment. We went to this Lutheran church which turned out to be

impossible for a number of reasons, so right now I am a “none.” But if you conclude from that that I am a flaming atheist, that would be a big mistake.

So I was right in saying the basic idea of secularization theory—that the modern world means the decline of religion—has been massively falsified. With two important exceptions: Europe, especially Western Europe (Russia is a special case), and an international intelligentsia which tends towards godlessness or secularity. But that’s it! There’s no evidence for this theory in the United States, which is furiously religious.

I taught for six years in Texas, at a Baptist university. Secularization theory after you spend three days there would strike you as utterly absurd. But in the rest of the world, too—Latin America, Africa, Asia—all the major religious traditions of the world are experiencing revival movements. The revival of Islam is not just about terrorism; there is a wave of resurgence of Muslim piety among ordinary people. The same goes for Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism. So, to generalize from these American survey data about what is happening in the world is absurd. And even in terms of America, they are not what they seem.

Non-identification with an organized faith does not necessarily mean faithlessness. Perhaps it means that religiosity has become more fluid. And it’s probably influenced by a degree of social mobility.

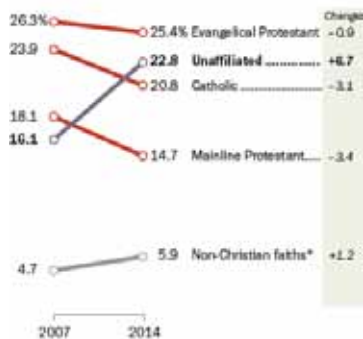
osity has become more fluid. And it’s probably influenced by a degree of social mobility.

Well, people are socially mobile and geographically mobile. If you put together two factors, one social/cultural and the other legal—if you put together pluralism, which simply means different religions and value systems coexisting in the same society more or less at peace, with legally guaranteed religious freedom—what you get is something like American denominationalism, which has become global.

Take Judaism. Two hundred years ago, if you said, “Could Judaism have denominations?” that would sound crazy. Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people. In America, depending on how you count it, there are at least five Jewish denominations: Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. But if you count every Hasidic community as a denomination—which actually makes sense, since the Satmar and the Lubavitch movements are like denominations—then Judaism is as denominationalized as American Protestantism. Every one in America becomes a denomination. A student of mine found sixty Buddhist centers in the greater Boston area.

When I was last in the hospital, with my fractured hip, I met the Buddhist chaplain at Beth Israel. Very nice guy, vaguely Asian in appearance. “Why are you coming to me?” I asked. He said, “In the intake information you didn’t put down a religion.” (I didn’t want to put Protestant and be visited by some crazy Baptist preacher.) So I got him. And I had a very nice conversation with him. I asked, “Do you have many Buddhist patients?” “No,” he said, “hardly any.” “Well, do you teach Buddhism?” “I couldn’t do that.” I guess his salary is paid for by Beth Israel. “So what do you do?” Very interesting answer: “I

Americans’ religious identification, 2007–2014. Source: *America’s Changing Religious Landscape* (Pew Research Center, 2014). <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.



put Buddhist concepts in a sort of secular frame, like giving up the self, like attentiveness, like patience." I said, "That one I could use."

That gets us to the other question, which I find the most important: Is secularism a danger? It depends on what you mean by secularism. As an ideology it can range from extreme hostility to religion—like scientific atheism in the old Soviet Union—to ACLU lawyers in America who go to court because somebody put a Christmas tree in a public park, which is insane. All of that is secularism. Is it a danger? Not in America. It's a nuisance. There are issues of religious freedom involved. Today in the newspaper, they put this poor woman [Rowan County Clerk Kim Davis] in jail in Kentucky.

For contempt of court.

Yes, because she continues to refuse to issue same-sex marriage licenses. I don't share this woman's theology or view of homosexuality, but a country which can afford to free conscientious objectors from military service in times of war can certainly afford having a county clerk claiming First Amendment rights in not issuing same-sex marriage licenses. But even in America, I would say, secularism is an annoyance rather than a danger.

Secular Space

The interesting issue is what I call a secular space. You cannot have a modern society without an area of that society which is totally godless, if you wish, which operates with a purely secular discourse. When I was working on a book recently, I stumbled on Hugo Grotius. He was a Dutch jurist in the seventeenth century and one of the founders of modern international law. He used a Latin phrase to say that international law has to be formulated *etsi deus non*

daretur, "as if God did not exist"—purely secular discourse. He had no choice. Europe at that time was divided between Catholic and Protestant states: Anglican, Lutheran, Calvinist, Arminian in the Netherlands; the Ottoman Empire; Russia as part of Europe. It had to be "as if God did not exist" if all these people were going to sign onto it.

This spread to other areas of life. It began, I would argue, with modern science and technology. You cannot study modern astronomy using Hindu mythology. You cannot fly an airplane looking into a Talmudic handbook. These are secular disciplines. Modern society couldn't exist without them. Our death rate would go up incredibly as soon as we stopped.

"As if God did not exist": this can coexist with very supernaturalist religion. I recently hit on an example of this. The Pope is driven around in his Popemobile. He goes from one supernatural event to another. So imagine Pope Francis riding around, going to a sanctification ceremony, about to declare some Bolivian nun to be a saint, which actually extends papal jurisdiction into the other world. The car breaks down. I suppose the Vatican has a garage with automotive technicians, and probably also has an office for exorcism, because exorcism is a recognized Roman Catholic practice. Well, which do the aides of the Pope call? The garage, of course; not the exorcist. So the supernatural mission of the Pope on that particular occasion is supported by a purely secular technique.

That is tremendously important for a number of reasons. First of all, the secular space not only allows you to have surgery, which I hope will save your health for many years to come. It also allows a number of other things, without interfering with someone's being a believing Orthodox Christian or Buddhist or whatever. On the personal level, both

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religious believers and observers of the modern world, or secularists, have seen the secular and the religious as being in opposition—modernity is secular, religion is not modern, they collide. Well, they do sometimes: the people in Moscow (I forget their name) who think that the world is 6,000 years old, a belief they share with millions of my Texan friends—there is a collision there [of science] with faith. But there are relatively few of these areas of direct collision.

Medical ethics and bioethics is an area of enormous collision.

Yes, but—this is a good example: What are the issues right now? Assisted suicide, use of genetic material from embryos, let alone abortion or contraception if you have a hangup on that. Yes, there are some cases of collision, but most people who are religious perfectly combine their religious beliefs and practices with being very modern people. Come with me to central Texas and you'll meet them on every street corner. How is that possible? Here my training as a sociologist is helpful. My teacher, Alfred Schütz (who was totally uninterested in religion) coined a very useful concept: relevance structure.

What is a relevance structure? Different areas of our lives have different relevances. It has always been the case since—excuse my non-Biblical view—since our ancestors climbed down from the trees, but it's much more so in a modern society because it's so complicated, so we have to move from one relevance to another. You're in an architecture bureau, then you go to an Orthodox group, God knows what else you do. Relevances shift. We do that all the time.

An example I like to give is one that involves Orthodoxy, a story I heard from a friend of mine, Christopher Marsh, a Russia expert. The Hermitage in St. Petersburg has, I believe, the greatest

collection of Orthodox icons in the world. It was founded by Catherine the Great, it became a museum; all through the Soviet period they had these icons, people visited them and had, one hopes, some kind of aesthetic experience. Apparently, fairly recently, a group of people came to the museum, went to the icons, and had a worship service, with candles. They kissed the icons, maybe they brought incense. The tourists thought it was curious, but the administration didn't like this at all. It was an inappropriate relevance structure. For a short period they transformed a purely secular space into a space for Orthodox worship—very interesting.

Another example I think I give in my book: I know a very successful eye surgeon in Boston, who operated on cataracts for both my wife and me. He's an Orthodox Jew, I guess Modern Orthodox. He wears a skull cap in his office, not in the operating room (if he does, no one sees it—he's got a uniform on). I haven't discussed religion with him, but I know he's very Orthodox and his patients love him. I talked to one who said he's a real mensch, he's warm. And I noticed that he dealt with me as a person, not as a symptom on two legs. Why? I imagine the way he sees it—do you know the concept *tikkun olam*? it's a rabbinical concept, "the repair of the universe." The universe is defective and I, as Jew, am supposed to help repair it, thereby hastening the coming of Messiah. He probably thinks of his profession in that way. Fine: it's perfectly genuine and it translates into his behavior. But not in what he does in the surgery. If it did, the surgery would fail, and even his most Orthodox clients would sue him if he leafed through the Talmud to find the next step in surgery. Out of the question. Purely secular space.

There's a personal level and there's a political level. In a democracy, if you

want to convince your fellow citizens of some particular moral purpose that you have—say you want to change the prison system, one of the biggest scandals in American society today, the horrendous prison system, based on insane laws. Increasingly a bipartisan majority agrees this is untenable: millions of people in jail including kids who stole, I don't know, chewing gum three times and then become felons for life. If you want to advocate for reform, you have to use arguments within the secular space. You cannot say, "God does not like this." "This is not Christian." "A good Buddhist does not put people in jail for life." You have to put it in secular terms: "It's against basic American notions of human dignity." And there are utilitarian grounds: "It's too expensive."

OK, I'm not involved in prison reform, though I think we all should be. But I'm a fanatical opponent of capital punishment. I think it's a barbaric thing that a civilized society should not employ. Barring no exceptions. I would even have put Eichmann in jail for life, rather than hang him. But public opinion in America is changing. It's increasingly pro-abolition. Why? I would say for all the wrong reasons. It's too expensive—it takes ten million dollars to get somebody executed with all the appeals—and there are more and more cases in which DNA shows that people were wrongly convicted (even ardent pro-capital punishment people don't want to see an innocent person killed). And then on top of that, some of these things don't work very well, injections and so forth. All of these are good reasons, but they are not why I think I am opposed to it. But certainly you can't say it's against the teachings of Jesus. You can't. You have to put it in secular terms. That's extremely interesting.

But that's where your Dutch friend was right. You can get consensus in a pluralist society.

Well, he believed natural law was the answer, which I doubt. But what's interesting is that it spread beyond international law. In the Netherlands this was very much the case. I don't know legal history in the Netherlands, but I know enough about Dutch history. What were the two major problems of the Dutch newly independent Netherlands? One was to prevent Spain from reconquering their territory. The other was to build a system of dams to prevent half the country from being flooded. The independent Netherlands was almost all Protestant in the north and mainly Catholic in the south. It was Catholic and Protestant provinces joined in a united state. They had to collaborate on the question of how to prevent the country from being flooded: they had to act as if God did not exist, not as Protestants or Catholics.

Let me give you a political example I find very revealing: the constitution or Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany, which went into effect as a bill of rights when it was voted in by the constitutional assembly in 1949. Unlike the American case, in which the bill of rights came some years later in the form of amendments, there is upfront in the German constitution—in the first article—an assertion of rights. A very lapidary sentence: "The dignity of man is inviolate." A fundamental value of the new democratic state. The historical context is not difficult to see: It was only four years after the fall of the Nazi regime, with its horrendous violations of human dignity, still fresh in the memory of most of the people—well, all of the people—who were in the assembly. Some of them were in concentration camps. And a pretty awful regime was a few miles to the east: the Soviet Empire. Throughout the German constitution, which is still the law of the land, there is no reference to religion at all. Germany had begun rapidly secularizing at that point. Most Germans today are not re-

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ligious; they don’t belong to Christian churches. But they can all agree on this, on the basis of moral insights they share on the human condition.

That’s tremendously important. It means that people can agree on certain moral propositions for different reasons. The Christian can say, “This is the will of God. Man created in the image of God—that’s the basis of human dignity.” Other religions have other ways of dealing with this. But agnostics and atheists can ascend to that first sentence, too, about what it means to be human. That’s an enormously significant political benefit. The secular discourse of the German constitution interacts with the religious beliefs of citizens which are quite different. Now if someone were an ISIS type—“kill the infidel”—they could not agree to that sentence. But a non-extremist Muslim can agree to it. God is justice and mercy. Every chapter of the Qur’an—every surah—begins with *bismillah*, “In the name of God, who is merciful, who is compassionate.” (Every chapter except one, for whatever reason.) This is where, I think, the people who want to oppose radicalism theologically within the Muslim context should begin.

While I still directed the research center at Boston University, we had a conference on the hospital as an interaction platform for religion and secularity. Every hospital is a temple to secularity. The high priests run around in long white coats. Hierarchy all the way down: you have patients with their johnnies, exposing their behinds to the manipulations of the clergy. And everything there is modern technology and modern science. But it’s constantly permeated with religion, both formally and informally. Chapels; chaplains, including my Buddhist friend; prayer circles. Eight years ago, I was in hospital for three weeks. At one point a young intern came by, an MD. After

we had a five minute talk, he said, “By the way, you should know that some of us are praying for you.” Then one of the cleaning woman, who was Latina, embraced me. We spoke Spanish together, and she said “Todos estamos en las manos del Señor”: “we are all in the hands of God.” So it’s not hermetically sealed against religion.

So I think my new paradigm, if I have enough chutzpah to call it a new paradigm—it’s a new way of looking at religion and modernity, and it has both personal implications and social-political implications. The political ones come out in favor of religious freedom: even if you didn’t believe in it, it’s the most practical way to handle a pluralist society. I said that in a lecture in Beijing, at Renmin University, where the higher cadre of the Communist party get degrees. I said to them, “I’m not telling you what to do, but if you have a society which is religiously pluralistic, it’s not a good idea to hit people because of their religion, unless they’re a very small minority and you can afford that. If there are millions of them, you’d better have some kind of accommodation with them.” And all the apparatchiks nodded. So I think that was the most provocative part of the lecture.

Culture Wars and Religious Freedom

Culture wars often seem to move from the public sphere to churches and, infused with sacred power, go back to society and fight even more fiercely. Are these wars inevitable in churches?

Some culture wars come from the public sphere to the churches, some originate in the churches. Take the obvious example: the Catholic hangup on birth control. It did not come from the public sphere. They hit the public sphere with their view of it. There have been many

cases of Catholic hospitals where the nuns didn't want to be forced by Mr. Obama to hand out condoms.

It is a somewhat hypocritical cause, because it is not consistent with the actual practice of those medical centers, which, in cases of rape, give the morning after pill at the very least.

Yes, but if I were Cardinal O'Brien, Archbishop of Providence, Rhode Island, I would say, "We don't want the government to tell us what to do in these matters. If we decide in certain occasions we're going to have an abortion, it's regrettable, but it's not the government who should tell us that. It's an issue of religious freedom." I agree with that.

I have a contract now with Gordon College, an Evangelical college in the North Shore. I get along with Evangelicals. They know I'm not one of theirs, but we get along. They have a big thing going on now. Their president—a sociologist, Michael Lindsay—was one of I-don't-know-how-many presidents of evangelical institutions who wrote a letter to President Obama. It's an issue of religious freedom. They have a code of behavior for faculty and students which includes a provision on homosexual behavior.

There was a storm of outrage in the communities around there. I talked to the woman who's my manager there, and I said, "Look, I don't agree with Michael on homosexuality, but I do agree it's an issue of religious freedom." If a Baptist college decides that their understanding of Christianity means that you can't have homosexual activity on campus, that must be respected. And if you let the government interfere with that, you are making a big hole in the First Amendment.

I think religious freedom is so important. There are always rights in colli-

sion. Unless there is enormous damage done by a religious group, it trumps other rights. And I would rather see some idiotic doctrine like creationism be taught than have the government tell people they can't teach that in a school that gets public funds. Well, that's another story.

Might it be the churches' place to resist culture wars instead of fueling them?

The British Parliament, one year ago, passed the Same-Sex Marriage Act. The Catholics had been fighting it until the bitter end, and they're still fighting it. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who's fairly new—an interesting man who has a business background—issued a statement right after the parliamentary decision: We're not going to do what the Catholics are doing. Parliament has voted, this is now the law of the land, we will obey it. We disagree with it, but we're not going to fight it. But if you want to be married—two men or two women—we will not conduct the wedding for you. There are lots of churches in England that will happily marry you, so go somewhere else. The only thing we're concerned about is maintaining our traditional doctrine—marriage is between one man and one woman—and we don't want Anglican clergy to be sued or in any way legally penalized for not performing these weddings.

That was before the parliamentary decision prohibiting the Church of England from conducting same-sex marriages—which is a quirk of British law, because unlike in America, the Church of England is not separate from the state. It has legal authority in marriage.

But in America, too—in every state, as far as I know—if a clergyman performs the wedding, at the end he says something like "According to the laws of the State of Massachusetts, I now declare

you man and wife.” So he acts as an agent of the state. And that creates the problem. If it’s clear that he’s not the agent of the state, the state exercises its authority by issuing a marriage license. It doesn’t need the ceremony. In fact, if you get the license you can do whatever you like, have your uncle spill champagne all over you.

It’s different in England, and the Anglican church generally is a more complicated issue. Because, having created this provision in the law, now—a year later—the Church of England has moved toward recognition of homosexual unions but can’t conduct them because they created a law that basically prohibits them from doing it. So it will be interesting to see how it plays out.

But what they can do? That’s happening in other countries, including the United States: they will bless the union. The church does not affect the marriage—which, by the way, was also the case in the Lutheran Reformation.

But it will create a legal problem in England because, unlike in America—where you need a marriage license and you don’t need a religious ceremony—you can have a religious ceremony and the clergyman acts as an agent of the state. It’s a one-step process.

The English constitution is part of the genius of the English state, at least for the last couple hundred years. Not like France, where everything has to be logical. In England there’s a wonderful practicality. One of the nicest examples I know is a lecture I heard by the then-chief rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks. He was talking about how practical the English are compared to the French. When the Queen opens Parliament, there is a parade with her at the end. Before her go the Archbishop of Canterbury and all the other religious functionaries, including Buddhist

monks. In front of the whole parade is a guy with a big cross. Well, Sacks said, “This is difficult for me. I’m an Orthodox Rabbi. I don’t want to march behind the cross.” So the religious leaders had a rather short meeting, and said, “What we’ll do is put the rabbi first, then we’ll have the guy with the cross, followed by the Archbishop of Canterbury.” The French would never do that! They’d have to have a philosophical treatise.

Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism seems to be at stake in the culture wars. What would be your definition of it? In your book In Praise of Doubt, you make the case that fundamentalism, both religious and secular, “is always an enemy of freedom.”¹ Can you elaborate?

Of course fundamentalism is an enemy of freedom. I would define fundamentalism as a project which tries to restore the taking-for-grantedness of religion, where supposedly there is no doubt.

An example I like to give: In ancient Greece, when two strangers met, one would ask the other, “Who are your Gods? What Gods do you worship?” That was the equivalent of our exchanging telephone numbers. If you knew someone’s “area code,” in ancient Greece—if there were such a thing—you’d have a good idea of what gods would be worshipped. It’s taken for granted: if you were Athenian, you worshipped the gods of Athens (and if you were like Socrates, who questioned the gods of Athens, you were killed for atheism). I don’t think that was a good thing.

We have freedom. Freedom is a good thing. Fundamentalism is, I think, bad for faith. A reflective person in a society which is pluralistic has made certain choices. They don’t have to be philosophical: thank God, most people

¹ Anton C. Zijderveld and Peter L. Berger, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 86.

aren't philosophers. But even a very simple person has to figure out what he really believes. There are situations that force him to, especially marginal situations of life—serious illness, death, bereavement, or whatever. Or moral choices which are difficult.

I think the project to restore taking-for-grantedness is futile, because you know that you are not forced. To take an extreme case: We used to live in Brooklyn, a few blocks from Williamsburg, which is the Hasidic center. If you go around there or visit it, you'd think you were in a shtetl in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. People speak Yiddish, they have their own schools, the kids don't watch television, they don't go to movies—it can become a kind of taken-for-granted thing. It's very difficult to escape. There's a very good sociological study that came out last year by a sociologist, Lynn Davidman, called *Becoming Un-Orthodox*. She describes how people get out of such Orthodox neighborhoods. It's not easy, it's wrenching, but you can do it. And she describes it—if they really want to get out, men cut off their sidelocks, put on a baseball cap, and take the subway to Manhattan. Same in Mea She'arim, in Israel: They speak Yiddish, they throw rocks at taxis that go there on Saturdays. But you can get out of that—you can take a bus to Tel Aviv.

So fundamentalism is actually difficult to maintain in a modern world. You have to have the door tightly closed. If you open it a little bit, the whole dynamic of pluralism comes flooding in.

Is that what makes fundamentalism go on the offensive?

Yes. If you can't deal with doubt, you have to prevent anybody from spreading doubt: kill them, throw them out, or at least stop them, don't talk to them. That's not very easy. In Christian



terms, it requires a sort of totalitarian society. Sects like Hasidic in Brooklyn are mini-totalitarianisms. They don't have physical coercion, but psychologically there is a very strong coercion.

The last attempt to do this on a national scale in Christian terms was in Franco's Spain, which I visited in my youth. It was the only time I was arrested, in a small town in Andalusia. There was a Corpus Christi procession and everyone knelt down—and I didn't. I stood very respectfully. The whole procession stopped. There were soldiers with fixed bayonets and drums. The priest pointed me out and two policemen came and took me away. Fortunately, nothing happened. I told them I was American. "Did you mean disrespect to the Catholic religion?" I said, "No, no, I was ignorant." They let me go.

That was the last attempt, with a good deal of brutality. But it worked, in a way. What happened? For economic reasons they opened up to the rest of Europe. In fact, Opus Dei convinced them that the market economy was the way to go if Spain was to overcome poverty—and they were right. And all of Europe flooded it. The Pyrenees were no longer the iron fence. And the result is that Spain today is one of the most secularized countries in Europe.

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Fundamentalism, unless it is loosened up, is bad for the individual, obviously. But it's also bad for the society. It leads to either a coercive regime, or an ongoing conflict—civil war. In the U.S., I've had the occasion in the last few years to observe very closely what goes on in the Evangelical community. Most of them are not fundamentalist, but how far can they accept the secular space? It's very interesting.

Do you believe it is a universal religious phenomenon, or is it pertinent to some religions only?

No, fundamentalism can occur in any religious tradition—and it can be secular. It doesn't have to be religious: there are political fundamentalisms, even aesthetic fundamentalisms. There are secular ideologies which are fundamentalist, there are fundamentalist feminists, there are fundamentalist vegetarians. You name it! But of course, when it's linked to state, then it becomes lethal.

If you have a state in with the rule of law—and where religious freedom is enshrined in the law, which is true in every Western democracy—there are ways of getting out. And it makes sense to try to infiltrate these communities. The public school sometimes does it inadvertently; they don't want to do it, but it happens.

And totalitarianism does not have a good success rate in the twentieth century, which is good news. Because unless you want to shut off your society against all outside contacts, you can't have a modern economy. The result is something like North Korea. Half the population starves to death and you have some horrible regime in charge that kills everybody who disagrees. Well, North Korea doesn't have a very happy future ahead of it. The Spanish example is much less horrible—at least after some years the Franco regime mel-

lowed somewhat, unlike North Korea, which is still as awful as it was in the beginning—but the world economy is a good thing. Not in everything, but in this it's a good thing.

Religious Experience

Describe your personal experience of the Orthodox Church.

I remember the profound impression that I had of Father Alexander Schmemmann after several personal encounters: a thoroughly modern man—indeed a very French intellectual—yet who also radiated a very strong spirituality—not French at all. I've enjoyed attending the Liturgy. The first time I attended an Orthodox Easter service was in New York at the old Russian cathedral on Second Avenue, which was in communion with Moscow during the Soviet period. The congregation was Russian émigrés. It was a wonderful experience: it started at midnight, we all went around the church, and when we came back the lights were on. I was enormously impressed. I was moved. And the one very funny thing that happened—I was standing in the back as all of this was going on and suddenly a side door opened and in came an old man in a full uniform of a tsarist officer. But I don't have as much personal experience with Orthodoxy as with many other religions, including Islam.

So what about Islam?

One of my experiences of transcendence was in Istanbul at the Sultan Ahmet Mosque, also known as the Blue Mosque. My institute had a project in Turkey, long before the Erdoğan party came to power, on Islamic business organizations. And while I was there, I was trying to reach [my wife] Brigitte on the phone, and I couldn't get through. I was getting very worried. I was sitting in my hotel room and I didn't know



Interior of Sultan Ahmet Mosque, Istanbul. Photo by Christian Perez.

what to do. And someone offered to show me some of the mosques. I hadn't been to the Blue Mosque yet. Inside are all of these beautiful blue tiles. When we went, there was no service; it was completely empty. There was just an old man sleeping, I think, in the back. I was alone in that space. And that vast, empty space—very Muslim. The presence of God hits you in it. A very Islamic experience.

Could you verbalize what is "Muslim" about the space?

Empty spaces are very important symbols of God's transcendence in Islamic architecture. It was an experience mediated by an Islamic building. Islam is not ISIS. Every religion can become murderous—certainly Christianity did, God knows. So did all the others. Buddhists think they are the religion of peace, but look what is happening in Sri Lanka and Burma. But Islam, at its core from the beginning, emphasized the greatness and justice and compassion of God.

I find it enriching to study Islam and Judaism, in part because of how it makes me reexamine my own faith.

If you are clear about what the core of your faith is, these other experiences don't attack the core. I'm sure a Muslim or an Orthodox Jew would not accept that Christ is risen from the dead and that this is the center of religion, but the fact that there are practicing Jews and practicing Muslims does not attack or undermine my faith in the core of

Christianity. The difficulty I have with Islam and Judaism is that both are religions of law. In fact, the Arabic word for law is the same as the Hebrew word: *din*. A Muslim can ask an Orthodox Jew, "What's your *din*?" And, "Oh, I see you don't eat pork." But I can't buy that. I don't want to be forced to eat halal meat or not answer the telephone on Saturday or something like that.

Philosophically and theologically, Islam and Judaism are a lot closer to one another than either is to Christianity. They understand each other much better.

Still, the three monotheistic religions are, in some basic way, similar. There's an interesting Jewish author, a French Talmudist and philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. He wrote something wonderful: "Beyond the Law, there is a vast ocean of mercy." That's a wonderful sentence. And likewise, in the Islamic Hadith, God is supposed to have said, "My mercy has overcome my anger."

I've argued that the great antipodes in the history of human religion are Jerusalem and Benares—very different worlds in their understandings of reality and redemption. Jerusalem, the location of the Jewish Temple, the place where Jesus was crucified and rose, the place where Muhammad started his journey to heaven; and Benares, the holy city in Hinduism, where you can immerse yourself in the Ganges and thereby in the eternal flow of divinity. Benares is noisy with thousands of pilgrims, but just a short distance from it is wonderfully quiet Sarnath, where the Buddha, after his enlightenment, preached his first sermon and got his first disciples. Those are the antipodes. It doesn't mean they are necessarily contradictory, but they are much more difficult to relate to Christianity than Judaism or Islam.

The basis of reality in Hinduism and all religion coming out of South Asia

"The three monotheistic religions are, in some basic way, similar."

is reincarnation (which has had Christian proponents, Origen being the most famous of the Greek Fathers—and there’s a Kabbalistic notion of reincarnation—but it’s very minor in Western monotheism). In Indian religion, it is central. And there are three universal truths for Buddhism which the Buddha preached, the first time near Benares. All reality is transient, all reality is suffering, and all reality is non-self: Nothing in the world is permanent, everything flows. Suffering is universal and repeats itself endlessly in each individual incarnation. The self is an illusion. I would say Western monotheism has a core principle in opposition to each one of these. God is permanent and ultimately real. Reality does not just flow. Yes, suffering permeates the world, but there is redemption from suffering, which is the promise of a future with God. And the self is not an illusion: the self was created in the image of God.

² Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1979), 54–55.

The Orthodox Church in America

In your 1979 book The Heretical Imperative, you stated that the recent formation of the Orthodox Church in America “has revolutionary implications, for there now exists, for the first time in America, an Orthodox church that is no longer defined ethnically, that uses English as its liturgical language, and that is a self-consciously pan-Orthodox presence on the American religious scene.”²

When you state that the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church in America has revolutionary implications, what exactly did you mean? Did you think that the OCA would be able to make a positive contribution to religious—that is, Christian—and inter-religious dialogue in a pluralistic context?

I have a weak spot for Orthodoxy. I couldn’t be Orthodox; there is too much

baggage there that I couldn’t carry. But Eastern Orthodoxy is a wonderful corrective to Western Christianity. I think I mentioned Paul Evdokimov, I read one of his books. One of my students is Michael Plekon, who translated some of these guys. He’s an OCA priest. He did his doctorate with me—a very interesting man. He made me read some St. Sergius people. And one passage in Evdokimov made me sit up. It said that Western religion, both Catholic and Protestant, back to Augustine, is focused on a relationship between God and man that takes place in a courtroom. Man is guilty, depraved; Christ takes on the sins of the world; God forgives and man is justified. In the Eastern tradition, the relationship between God and Man takes place in a hospital. Suffering and death and sin are part of one disease.

And that means that ideologically or theologically, they might agree. I’m sure there are Lutheran-Orthodox dialogues, the Catholics have a cottage industry of dialogue, they find they all agree on this or that. The Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue went over the *Filioque* for three years and then decided, let’s give it to the East; we don’t need the *Filioque*. Great—I can see why the Orthodox didn’t like it. The theologians can always find formulas on which most people agree. The laity don’t know what this is about and couldn’t care less. But they know what the differences are instinctively. An Orthodox person knows, when he goes into a Catholic or Protestant church, that there is something different from what happens in his church. A different spirit.

Eastern piety focuses on Easter Sunday. Western piety focuses on Good Friday. And there is that wonderful Eastern Orthodox hymn, “Christ trampled death with death.” It’s a wonderful sentence.

“Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.”

That’s right. That’s very powerful. Christ is the victor. And the resurrection is a tremendous victory, which initiates the final redemption of the entire cosmos. This legal business, this Latin theory of atonement—Anselm started it in the West. There’s a Swedish Lutheran theologian, Gustaf Aulén, who wrote a book in the thirties or forties called *Christus Victor*, in which he argues (whether historians would agree with this I don’t know) that the original Lutheran reformation is much closer to Eastern Orthodoxy than it is to Anselm. It’s a very good book.

Now let me get back to why Christians should be happy about pluralism: for people with any degree of reflectiveness, pluralism undermines the taking-for-grantedness of any religious tradition. People are naturally afraid of this: they would like to be whatever they are—Christian or Jewish or Buddhist or whatever—just as they have a certain color of hair or an allergy. No choice, that’s who they are. That’s their real self. Well, that becomes difficult when you’re surrounded by people who don’t take for granted what you used to take for granted. Why is that good for you and good for the church? Because it forces you to reflect on what is essential to your faith and what isn’t.

Rabbi Hillel the Elder, one of the founders of Rabbinical Judaism, was asked—I think, mockingly, by some student—could you tell the meaning of Torah while you stand on one leg? And he then uttered probably the first formulation of the Golden Rule (Christians think Jesus first said it, but Jesus quoted Hillel), and his version was: “Do not do unto others what you would hate to have done unto yourself.” And then he added, “the rest is commentary.”

With all due respect to Hillel, is there a Christian statement you could make while you stand on one leg? Yes: “Christ is risen.” Now, when you say “Christ is risen,” you start thinking a hundred questions. First of all, who is Christ? Was there an empty tomb, too? If there had been a police camera in the tomb, what would it have shown after the resurrection? What was the post-resurrection body of Christ like? According to the New Testament accounts, it wasn’t a resuscitated corpse. It went through walls. And then of course the most important question: what does it mean for me and for the whole world? So lots of questions. But that is what it’s all about.

Now you can ask, what about all the rest of the miracles reported in the New Testament? Did Jesus walk on the Sea of Galilee? I have no idea. If Jesus was what he said was and what Christians believe he was, I wouldn’t exclude it. There may be miracles. God is omnipotent. Maybe he did walk on the Sea of Galilee, but if it turns out he didn’t, it wouldn’t affect my faith one bit. And that has to do with lots of questions.

If I have a chance to sit down with the president of Gordon College, I will ask, Do you really think homosexuality is a key issue for Christians? I would say no. Sexuality can be an instrument of humiliating people, hurting people, but it can also be a wonderful experience, or it can also be something which is neither wonderful nor terrible. I don’t think there is a Christian doctrine of sexuality beyond the Golden Rule. Don’t do unto others what you don’t want them to do to you.

Look, the OCA is a very small group. Most of American Orthodoxy is still in the Babylonian captivity of ethnicity. And to have an Orthodoxy which carries what I think is the main message

“Pluralism undermines the taking-for-grantedness of any religious tradition.”

of Orthodoxy, in the Liturgy, in the English language—without carrying all this ethnic baggage—is a great contribution to the rest of Christendom in America.

What did Orthodoxy do? They were involved in the ecumenical movement from the beginning. They're always very visible in the big hats, very colorful. Mostly what they said was "no, no." To all the nonsense the World Council of Churches was proclaiming, the Orthodox said "no, no, no." A useful contribution. But I think they have a more useful contribution to make, which is this: What is the faith all about?

Ideology and Religious Conflict

Given the Orthodox Church's reluctance here and especially in Eastern Europe to speak and act on behalf of human rights, can you offer any suggestions as to how it might overcome its inertia?

The Orthodox don't think there are human rights?

The Ecumenical Patriarch does. The Moscow Patriarchate is more equivocal, and the diaspora is reluctant to get into the topic.

What is their objection?

The objection is to a notion of universal human rights that is secular and ostensibly does not relate to the relationship between man and God.

Sure, since the French Revolution and the American Revolution, the notion of human rights has become secular discourse, but no one can really question that there are Christian roots to this. That would be a distortion of history. The basic metaphor is man created in the image of God. You destroy human dignity and you spit in the face of God. I think the problem with the Orthodox in

Moscow is that they don't like the secular discourse. They want *their* discourse to be the public discourse. Which precludes pluralism—and probably, in the long run, precludes democracy.

Given your contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church, what advice would you give to the OCA, as its dependency on the Moscow Patriarchate increases?

Stay away from Moscow. Yes, I know there are people in the OCA who are tempted to go back to Mother Moscow. Mother Moscow is an ugly hag at this point. I think there are wonderful priests in some Siberian villages, but in Moscow it stinks. I had a fight with one of them, Hilarion Alfeyev. He was then the bishop for Western Europe. He gave one of these lectures as if he was proclaiming unassailable truth. "The earth goes around the sun"—in that tone. And I said to him, "That's all very interesting, Father Hilarion, but there are very few people outside of Russia who would possibly agree with you on this." He didn't like that at all. For the OCA I can only say: Stay away from Moscow.

Can we talk about Ukraine and the religious component of the war there? Many consider the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, to have a strong religious dimension: people are motivated to kill each other because they do or don't believe in the "Orthodox civilization," "Holy Rus," and so forth.

I don't know that much about Ukraine. I think the danger is not religion itself; it's the linkage of religion with political power, which has been the bane of Orthodoxy for a hell of a long time. The Putin regime has established a relationship with the Moscow Patriarchate which is as if you were still in the time of [nineteenth-century power broker Konstantin] Pobedonostsev. It's an unholy alliance between state and church, and Kirill—well, they benefit

"The notion of human rights has become secular discourse, but no one can really question that it has Christian roots."

from each other. The church gets privileges, the state gets legitimation. And Ukraine, the state of Ukraine, is a very pluralistic society. They have two or three Orthodox churches.

And Catholics, and Baptists.

And the state doesn't embrace any one of them. So I don't think there's an issue here of religion; it's not intrinsic to Eastern Orthodoxy. It's an unfortunate relationship with the state.

That leads to a question about ISIS. Many of our readers are Christians from the Middle East. Do you have any prediction what that region will be after the Islamic State? Can the West do anything to change the situation there?

Look, American policy on ISIS has been totally dominated by Obama's absolute refusal to put American boots on the ground. Which is an inherent contradiction: ISIS is a threat to Western civilization, a threat to America, and all we're going to do is send a couple drones and advisors who are not supposed to go into combat with troops, and find other people to put boots on the ground. It's not very successful.

I have no liking whatsoever for Mr. Obama. I have a visceral reaction against him, the immense hubris of this man. But I can understand American public opinion, after two defeats,

in Iraq and in Afghanistan—let's call it what it is—and general weakness all over the world, which is in a way the fault of the opposite policies of George W. Bush, with his machismo. So I don't know where this is going to end. But something like ISIS cannot be argued with, no dialogue is possible. You have to kill them. So the question is, who is going to do the killing? If we don't do it, we're going to have to find somebody or this will go on and on and spread as it already is.

American public opinion recognizes that ISIS is an indirect result of two long and failed campaigns.

They failed for a reason. The original mistake in Iraq was that we didn't plan for the post-Saddam future. It was a terrible mistake to disband the Iraqi army. It could have been co-opted. Get rid of the Saddam Hussein regime and the rest of the people will applaud us and sing "God Bless America." Then Obama in Afghanistan wanted to get out come hell or high water, and announced, "we'll leave by such-and-such a date." They more or less did, with just a few troops left. So, I have no answer to that. If I did, I would—

Run for president?

No, I couldn't, I'm not born in the United States. Anyway, I wouldn't be a good president. Heaven forbid. ✱

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