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# Religion in a Globalizing World

Key West, Florida

Some of the nation's leading journalists and distinguished scholars gathered in Key West, Fla., in December 2006 for the Pew Forum's biannual Faith Angle Conference on religion, politics and public life.

Peter Berger, professor emeritus of religion, sociology and theology at Boston University, examined the globalization of religious pluralism and how the peaceful coexistence of different racial, ethnic and religious groups has become a global phenomenon. He argues that pluralism – not secularization – and the resulting emergence of religious choice is the best model for understanding religion in a globalizing world. A question-and-answer session followed his presentation.

## Speaker:

Peter Berger (<http://www.bu.edu/religion/faculty/bios/berger.html>) , Professor Emeritus of Religion, Sociology and Theology, Boston University

## Moderator:

Michael Cromartie (<http://www.eppc.org/scholars/scholarID.10/scholar.asp>) , Vice President, Ethics & Public Policy Center; Senior Advisor, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Professor Berger has written dozens of books. His book *The Social Construction Reality*



(<http://www.penguin.co.uk/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780140135480,00.html>) is a contemporary classic in sociological theory and *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*

(<http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780385073059>) is one of the best books on the sociological theory of religion. He has written about theology. One of those is called *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity*; it's an excellent book. He has also written on economics, international relief and development. He wrote a book called *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*

(<http://www.randomhouse.com/anchor/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780385066303>) . His book on capitalism, called *The Capitalist Revolution* (<http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Economics/Developmental/Regional/?view=usa&ci=9780195111767>) , is a tour de force.

Today, Dr. Berger is going to speak to us about religion in a globalizing world, and we're delighted to have him here.

Thank you, Peter, for coming.



**PETER BERGER:** Thank you.

We live in an age of overwhelming religious globalization, and I don't think that one has to justify that statement to this group. Coming down here from Boston I realized I could be in Istanbul if it were a direct flight. But before that, I was in Los Angeles about five weeks ago, and three weeks ago I was in Europe, and both had to do with religious globalization.

In Los Angeles, the Templeton Foundation (<http://www.templeton.org>) ran a very successful conference on global pentecostalism, which was fascinating, and it was to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Azusa Street Mission, which was the origin of modern pentecostalism. There were very good papers, and we saw a little movie about the Azusa Street Mission, which was a pathetic little affair where this charismatic black preacher came out of Texas and started preaching. Estimates of the number of followers vary, I guess Pew (</surveys/pentecostal/>) has the latest. But in terms of worldwide pentecostalism, the estimates range within 250 million and 450 million adherents, which must be the fastest growth of any religious movement in history. It's an unbelievable phenomenon.

My first stop in Europe was Amsterdam. A friend of mine – a Dutch sociologist – is chairman of the advisory committee to the new Islamic University in Rotterdam, which is a very interesting institution. Just a little factoid: the majority of children in the incoming grade school class in Rotterdam public schools are Muslim – it is an incredible fact. I think there is no major world religion that is not globalizing in an impressive way. The Roman Catholic Church actually could be called the oldest global institution, and certainly is continuing this today, although it is very much changing its character. Many of you, I'm sure, know Philip Jenkins'

(<http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/j/p/jpj1>) writings on the new Christendom. The geographical and demographic center of Christianity is moving from north to south, and within a very few years European and North American Catholics, and Christians of any sort, will be in the minority in the world.

I mentioned pentecostalism, which I'm sure is the most dramatic religious explosion in the world today.

We – and when I say “we,” I don't mean the royal “we,” I mean our research center at Boston University – use the term popular Protestantism, which is a little vague, but when you see it you know it. So for example, the Mormons, who most people would not consider exactly Protestant, still are very similar to this broad family of religious groups in terms of social characteristics. Mormonism today is probably the fastest growing denomination worldwide – pentecostalism is not just one denomination. The explosion of Islam, especially in Europe, doesn't have to be elaborated upon here, but the same is true of every other major religion. Judaism is certainly globalizing, American Hasidic agents have been very influential in Eastern Europe – “agents” is the wrong term; missionaries or whatever you want to call it. Buddhism is spreading in the oddest places; the estimate now is that about 800,000 Americans are converts to Buddhism from other religions. Hinduism is spreading through a number of organizations like the Hare Krishna movement, the Sai Baba movement in a very interesting way.

I suppose that of the major world religions, the only one that does not globalize is Shinto: It can't, it's too linked to Japan. Even Confucianism, if you want to call it a religion, is globalizing and for a short and rather inglorious period, it became the state ideology of Singapore. I'm talking about facts that are well known, I think.

Let me present my major thesis this morning, which is what I want to talk about. My thesis is that what is happening with the globalization of religion is a globalization of pluralism. Pluralism, which was a much more geographically, much more limited phenomenon 150 or 200 years ago, has become a global phenomenon, and that has enormous implications, and I want to just draw out these implications this morning. What is pluralism? The term, as far as I know, was coined by Horace Kallen, an American philosopher of the 1920s, whom I think has justly

been forgotten. I don't want to be unkind. I once tried to read Kallen and I found him unreadable, but he used the term pluralism in a very normative sense, in a way to celebrate the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic, racial and religious groups in the United States.

Pluralism in the meantime is used in a less value-laden sense to mean simply the fact. Kallen talked about the fact and said it's a good thing. Well, you can use it without the good thing addition, simply as a value-free description of a situation. And I would define pluralism very simply as the coexistence in civic peace – that's very important – of different racial, ethnic and religious groups, with social interaction between them. That, I think, is very important. You can have a plurality of religious groups that do not interact, and then it's a little confusing to talk about pluralism.

I recently was on a panel with a very good Turkish sociologist and I talked about pluralism – modern pluralism. She said, well, pluralism existed in the Ottoman Empire, the millet system where you had Christians and Jews and various groups being sort of self-contained and given certain rights; that was pluralism. And I said, well, not really, because they didn't interact very much. Or India for example: Many Hindus are very proud of the fact that India has always been pluralistic. Well, there's the caste system, which made it extremely difficult for people to interact. The interaction is important in my concept of pluralism because as people talk to each other, as they converse with each other, they influence each other, and that is the real challenge of pluralism. If I am a member of religious community X and next door there are people from religious community Y, if I don't interact with them and if we agree not to have conflict, it can be a quite tolerable situation, but we're not going to influence each other very much. People influence each other by conversation, and that's a very important element of pluralism.

Now, my proposition is that modern pluralism is different not because it's unique, but because of its global spread and its pervasiveness. There have been pluralistic situations as I defined pluralism in earlier periods of history – very important for the history of Western civilization. The late Roman Empire was pluralistic. Not so incidentally, Christianity came in at that period.

So if you were in metropolitan centers of the Roman Empire – like, let's say, Alexandria – you had a very pluralistic situation. Or in the Book of Acts when the Apostle Paul went to Athens, he found temples and altars to every conceivable god. So that was very pluralistic, and if you look at the literature from that period, it strikes us as very modern. Stay with the example of Alexandria, if you went up the Nile for 50, 60 miles, I think you would come on a world of villagers and towns which were totally non-pluralistic, which were very self-contained. Today it is extremely difficult to find places in the world, which are self-contained in that way. And also the speed with which pluralization occurs today is unique.

Now, I would also argue that in terms of the effect on religion, pluralism is about the most important global fact to look at – not secularization. And that's a very important point to make. Until quite recently, most scholars who dealt with religion in the modern world adhered to the so-called secularization theory. So did I, by the way, when I started work as a sociologist of religion. And I was not alone: Most people had the same idea. The idea was very simple: the more modernity, the less religion. Modernization means a decline in religion. And I would say this was not a crazy idea, there were some reasons for saying that.

I think it was wrong. And I, along with most people in the field, changed my mind about 25 or so years ago, not for some philosophical or theological reason, but simply because the empirical evidence made it impossible to adhere to this theory. There are few people who heroically maintain the theory. The most prominent one died recently: very nice, very intelligent man, Bryan Wilson, All Souls College in Oxford. He maintained this to the end, and so do some other people. But most scholars of religion today, I think, would agree that secularization theory has been massively falsified. We don't live in an age of secularity; we live in an age of explosive, pervasive religiosity.

Now, there are two exceptions to this statement about the religious character of our age, which I cannot elaborate on, but I'm willing to do so anytime between now and midnight if you want to talk about this. The two exceptions: one is sociological, the other one is geographical. The sociological exception is, there is a relatively thin, but very influential stratum of people internationally; broadly speaking an intelligentsia who indeed is secular. And that's

even true of the United States. In many countries including the United States, this intelligentsia or cultural elite, if you want to use another term, is very much in conflict with the religious populace. It is a very important fact in many countries. Why are these people so secularized? Why this is so, I can't go into.

The other is the geographical exception, which to my mind is the most interesting question today in the sociology of religion. That's Western and Central Europe is the only important part of the world that is highly secularized. There're some others: Australia apparently. We haven't done any work in Australia, but what I've seen of Australian data, that's highly secularized. Very interesting place not very far from here is Quebec, which rapidly secularized itself in recent decades. But I think in both cases we're really dealing with extensions of Europe.

And, again, why Europe is so secularized is a fascinating issue, which I can't go into right now. We've just finished a research project on this. I'm doing a book with a British colleague on this topic, and, well, between us, we came up with seven reasons why Europe is the way it is, but I can't go into this. (Laughs.) But it's very interesting. People who have to deal with sociology of religion have to deal with Iranian mullahs – people like that. Well, the Iranian mullahs have been around for a long time, we know how they work basically and why. The interesting things, from a sociologist's point of view, are not Iranian mullahs, but taxi drivers in Stockholm and sociology professors in Paris. (Laughter.) And those are the really interesting subjects. Okay, back to pluralism.

One reason why secularization theory just collapses under its own weight is the United States, a strongly religious country, and if modernity is the key variable, are you going to seriously argue that the United States is less modern than Stockholm? I mean, it doesn't make any sense. And some people would say, oh, it's an exception. Well, it's too big an exception to keep the theory going. Something's wrong with the theory.

While secularity is not a necessary consequence of modernization, I would argue that pluralism is. And the reason has to do with some very basic processes of modernity: mass migration, mass travel, and probably most important, mass communication – films, television, the internet, you name it. What does it mean? What does globalizing communication mean? Everybody talks to everybody else, and as everyone talks to everybody else, a highly pluralistic situation is enhanced by technology and people begin to influence each other.

Now, let me give a rather personal illustration of what I'm talking about. I'm not just talking about interfaith committees sitting around tables like this. My older son married a woman from India who's a non-practicing Hindu – and he's a sort of non-practicing Protestant, but it is still a very interfaith marriage.

When my granddaughter was about six, the people across the street were missionaries for Jews for Jesus, and the two little girls had theological conversations with each other that were absolutely fascinating. I wasn't present at any of them, but I got the reports. (Laughs.) I would say inter-religious communication by 5-year-old, 6-year-old little girls is sociologically more significant than interfaith committees set up by the Vatican – (laughter) – because there are many more little girls than there are theology professors or whatever. It's a massive phenomenon, and I would say inevitable with modernity.

Now, what does that mean for religion? It means that both institutionally and individually, any particular religious tradition can no longer be taken for granted. And this has immense implications for the religious institutions and for individual human beings.

Religious institutions: What does it mean? I have argued before in different contexts that modernity in its essence means an enormous change in the human condition, from fate to choice; in other words, all kinds of practices, beliefs and institutions that for much of human history were simply an individual's destiny. You were born into a particular situation and that accidental birth determined almost everything you did, including your beliefs.

Modernity means choices, beginning with many choices in terms of technology, I mean, your tribe used one hammer for a particular task for hundreds of years. Now instead of one hammer, you have three technological systems. And there are choices in terms of consumption, production, marriage, occupation and in a sense most dramatically, even identity.

This movement from fate to choice affects not only individuals but also institutions. I would say in the pluralistic situation whether religious institutions like this or not, they become de facto voluntary associations. The prototypical modern, institutional form of religion is the voluntary association. Obviously this voluntariness is enhanced when you have a political and legal system, which guarantees religious freedom.

Even if you look at the world today, regimes that try to limit religious freedom – I would say Russia is a good example, China is a good example – of course they suppress the voluntariness, but they can't suppress it completely. And you have all kinds of things springing up, which I think Michael knows much more about this than I do, but which the authorities do not like and cannot control.

Another term to use here is the term “denomination,” a peculiarly American term. Richard Niebuhr, a church historian – not to be confused with his brother Reinhold – said that denomination was a new form of religious institution peculiar to the United States. And he defined it not as a sect, but a church which recognizes de facto, if not de jure, the right of other denominations that do exist. So you can speak of a denominationalization of religion. And take the Roman Catholic Church as a very important example. Certainly it couldn't think of itself as a voluntary association, but it has de facto become one. Probably first in the United States and then after Vatican II, internationally it has now officially accepted that position with its very impressive doctrine of religious freedom.

Even Judaism: it is not easily understood as a voluntary association with its linkage of religion and ethnicity. In the United States, it has become denominationalized. No matter how you count it, there are at least three Jewish denominations in the United States, and depending on what concept you use, there may be actually five or six.

Now, this leads to very significant changes. It obviously leads to changes in the relationship between religious institutions and the state. It changes the relations of institutions to each other. They become competitors in what in effect is a market, and it changes the relationship of religious institutions and their functions to the laity very significantly. Back to the Roman Catholic example, some Roman Catholic writers in the United States have talked regretfully of the protestantization of American Catholicism. I don't think one should understand this in terms of doctrine. The protestantization is precisely what I'm talking about: the voluntariness of adherence and therefore the importance of the laity. The Catholic laity, certainly in the United States, has become uppity in a way which is very new. I mean, in Boston, where I live, the pluralistic exchange also become players in a religious market.

That's very briefly, I think, the institutional consequences of this globalizing pluralism. There are also very interesting consequences for the individual – again a movement from fate to choice. And increasingly you find individuals who put together their own particular religious profile. You find this very much in North America and in Western Europe. You find it elsewhere as well. Robert Wuthnow (<http://www.princeton.edu/~csrelig/people/dir1.html>), who I think is one of the best sociologists of religion in the United States, has used the term patchwork religion: People put together different elements of their own tradition and other traditions and say, “Well, I'm Catholic, but -.” The “but” is very important and there are other things there.

For example, they believe in reincarnation. An enormous number of people in Europe and America believe in reincarnation, which is not exactly Christian doctrine. So that's part of “I'm Catholic, but I believe I've been here many times before,” or something like that. Danielle Hervieu-Léger, a French sociologist of religion uses the term “bricolage,” which means tinkering. It's like a Lego, you create your own little version of whatever it is you want to call yourself.

Now, one topic that I find very important is the interaction of two phenomena, which I would call relativism and fundamentalism. The pluralistic situation inevitably relativizes. If you lose the taken-for-granted status of the tradition, it becomes relativized, and actually our language says this very well. For example, one might say, “I happen to be Catholic” – an extremely interesting phrase. Or a more sort of Californian: “I'm into Buddhism.” (Laughter.) Which, of course, suggests that tomorrow I might be out of Buddhism, and in fact chances are that I will; I'll discover something else. So there's a relativization takes place, which is a fact.

Now, relativism I would say is the philosophical legitimization of this fact. It's a good thing, and I suppose the climax of this relativism in religion and in other things is the so-called postmodern theory. We all have our narratives. There's no way of saying that one narrative is superior to another, and the real virtue here is tolerance. We should all tolerate each other's narratives. This, by the way, is fine as long as you deal with religion that is empirically not falsifiable. When you're dealing with morality, this is a recipe for social disintegration. Just take a simple example: You're talking to a victim of rape and you say, well, there's the rapist's narrative and there's your narrative, and you know, you have to respect – well, you can't. If you do that, society will cease to exist. So relativism is a very dangerous direction.



Fundamentalism can be defined in different ways. I would define it as an attempt to restore or create anew the taken-for-grantedness of a particular worldview meaning in of a particular religious tradition, to be taken for granted against a relativization of the modern world. And that's a very difficult project.

Again, I could talk about this at inordinate length, but let me simply say there are two models of fundamentalism. One is – I call it the “reconquista” model. That was the term used in the endless war between Christians and Muslims in Spain when the Spanish Christians were going to re-conquer Spain from Islam. So I would say the reconquista model of fundamentalism is to impose the restored taken-for-grantedness on an entire society. That is a very difficult project. I would say there is no significant Christian community today who wants to do that. The Catholic Church has long given up this project. The role it had during the Spanish civil war would be unthinkable today.

Unfortunately, there are significant elements in the Muslim world who do want to do that. It's a very difficult project because for the project to succeed, you have to control and eliminate the pluralistic dynamic, and that's very hard to do. As I've mentioned before with Russia and China, even if you have a totalitarian state, it is difficult to do.

The more modest, and therefore more possible, model for fundamentalism is a sort of micro-totalitarianism. You don't try to impose your ideas on the society as a whole, but you create a community within which it becomes possible. This is the sectarian or sub-cultural possibility. It's also difficult because the pluralistic dynamic is very strong and you have to have very strong isolation of your community from the surrounding society, which you have decided can go to hell because the truth is now within your community. But at least compared to the reconquista model, it is feasible.

I think I should come to a conclusion. I'm sure you'll want me to go into some of these topics. Let me say that, again, in the dialectic between relativism and fundamentalism, looking at it now from the point of view of the healthy society or a healthy democracy, it seems to me both are equally destructive possibilities: relativism because it makes social order in the end impossible; fundamentalism because it creates either civil strife or, at worst when it succeeds, some kind of tyranny. And I think a very important intellectual and indeed political purpose would be to clearly define and occupy the middle ground, which is neither relativistic, in which all questions of truth become obsolete, nor a fundamentalist, militant adherence to absolute truth.

I think that is possible, and I would say in most western countries, most people indeed occupy that middle ground. I think if you look at survey data which some of you on around this table know better than I do, you'll find that most Americans are somewhere in the middle on most of the neuralgic issues of the culture wars. So it's not an impossible project I'm suggesting.

What I think is important is to find the intellectual definition of what such a middle position means. In terms of religion, I think I know exactly how to do it in my own case from the position of the theologically very liberal Lutheran. But I think it can be done from other positions, and in fact we've now set up an international working



group – about half American, half European – to define such a position in terms of a number of so-called Abrahamic traditions.

It's a difficult issue when we get to morality because while I think it is possible to have religious beliefs without certainty, you can't convince me of certain moral judgments are simply relativistic because of history and geography and my own position in life. And I'm now talking with a Dutch friend – a philosopher – to work together on the book on the moral middle ground. I think I should stop here.



**JAY TOLSON**, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT: I hope this doesn't force you to go into territory that you don't want to explore, but I think the most interesting case still is Europe: The exception that seems to sort of suggest that modernization theory wasn't all wrong. And I wonder the effectiveness of the ideology of secularism as something being taught in schools and relatively inculcated in Europeans, is at least one of the top seven, one of the top three or four in that list. Because it does seem to me the most interesting case, and certainly when American journalists are trying to talk about Europe and comparisons between Europe and America, a lot

focuses on the difference between our notions of secular and religious, and European notions. And would you go into that part of your book? And suggest also whether or not that ideology of secularism is at extreme risk right now for a variety of reasons – maybe good reasons as well as bad ones.

**BERGER**: OK. Brief answer: yes, I agree with you. One, if you go back historically, much has to do with the nature of the Enlightenment in Europe and in America. Gertrude Himmelfarb's book, *Three Paths to Modernity*, is a good, I think, historical analysis of this. The Enlightenment, at least on the continent of Europe, was very anti-clerical and event to some extent anti-Christian. That was not the case in America at all.

Now, you have to ask, sociologically, who were the social carriers of the Enlightenment? It was intellectuals. Then you have to ask what institutional avenues were available to these intellectuals to propagate their ideas? And there I would say the diametrically opposed cases are the United States and France. Why? Well, in France even today education is controlled by the national government, which sends out its corps of teachers – interesting term in French, a military term – throughout the country. Who were these teachers? Well, they were, in one way or another, intellectuals or aspiring intellectuals, and they brought their notion of Enlightenment to these children. Unless there was a Catholic school nearby, parents had little choice. As soon as education became compulsory, the children were exposed to the influence of these teachers.

It is a totally different situation in America. Even now, education is mainly a local matter, not quite because of unions and state interference, but basically it's still local people who control the schools. In America, if parents didn't like the teachers teaching their children, they'd fire them. The unwashed, unenlightened populace had the power over education, which it never had in France. Now, in other European countries it is more complicated, but I would say that's a very important factor, so I'm agreeing with you.

The secularism then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, because throughout Europe now the idea is that to be modern is to be secular, and that becomes self-fulfilling. Religion comes in a brown paper envelope, so not quite acceptable.

I think it's too early to say this is changing, but there are some indications that it may be changing. In terms of sociology of religion data, there's a slight up-tick of church adherence in most European countries. Interestingly enough, not in France – don't know why. There are other indications of discussion and people becoming interested in religion. The challenge of Islam is, I think, an important factor. But it's too early to say whether it's a real change. It's still a very secular part of the world.

**TOLSON:** Do you think in some ways that the nationalization of debate over curriculum via court cases forces this issue in this country – even though we are mostly accurately characterized as a highly religious nation, whatever that means – and that a lot of the issues that were resolved in the European context through this strong adherence to the Enlightenment ideology are now in fact being adjudicated at the national level though these debates that are often brought to trial over curricular matters? Do you think that [process] is making this a debate in our society?

**BERGER:** Oh, absolutely. And I think the term “culture war,” while it may be a slight exaggeration, refers to something which is sociologically real. I would say, looking at the United States that what you have is a heavily religious population with a highly secular cultural elite, and it’s out of that cultural elite that these court cases come – outraged atheists in Arizona who object to Christmas trees or whatever.

Now, the image I view – two extremes as Sweden and India, OK? Sweden – highly secularized society, minus 2 percent believe in God, that kind of thing – and India, where you take four steps and you meet six gods, OK? (Laughter.) Well, you could describe the United States as an Indian society with a Swedish cultural elite, and much of the history of American politics since 1963 – a pivotal year because of the Supreme Court decision on prayer in public schools – has been dominated by increasingly pissed-off Indians. (Laughter.) Have I answered your question? Yes, I’ve answered your question. Yes.



**MIKE ALLEN, TIME:** Mr. Berger, thank you for your illumination of these topics. I was interested in your remarks at the beginning about the growth of Pentecostalism and the Church Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I was anxious to get your view of how much of that is effort on their part, and how much of that is the appeal of their message?

**BERGER:** Well, both. This is a very missionary community, so there’s a lot of effort. They try to spread their truth, and the message is very powerful. It is not just the message, but also the way of life

that is being propagated here.

**ALLEN:** Are there other denominations or schools of thought that make similar effort without that kind of result?

**BERGER:** Well, some do, and there are good results. I mentioned, for example, the Mormons, who are doing surprisingly well with a very different message and a very different community. But I think the pentecostal package, if you want to call it that, is very hard to beat because it combines very strong communities that are created by grassroots people. And if you look at Latin America, Africa, where this is really exploding, these are very poor people who have never had institutions of their own. They create their own institutions and they run them. That’s very powerful. Enormous solidarity, mutual help, all of these are socially significant things. Add to this a form of worship which is highly emotional and it creates a very strong emotional catharsis for people in very difficult circumstances, particularly given the emphasis on healing, which goes from physical illness to all kinds of social problems. And on top of that, a morality which has an amazing similarity to what Max Weber was writing about in terms of the Protestant ethic in Europe and North America: hard work, education, clean living, et cetera.

Now, put all of this together, that’s a very powerful package. David Martin, a British sociologist, used a very nice term. He says it makes the package very transportable, so it adapts itself to very different social and cultural milieus in much of the world. So I think we can explain why pentecostalism is so powerful.

**DAVID VAN BIEMA, TIME:** I hope I can double up, but these two aren’t totally unrelated. The first is you mentioned the Ottoman situation and talked about it as sort of a fake pluralism, and I’m curious as to how you think about the *convivenza* in Andalusia during the period of Moorish control, and whether you think that that is as sort of fake a pluralism as the Ottoman pluralism? And then the other question, which is modern, has to do with where you think the current government of Turkey – Islamist, but within a secular context – and the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt fit into your spectrum of relativism and fundamentalism, and whether either of them is working out a sort of a viable model?



**BERGER:** Well, the Andalusia question frankly I'm not very competent to answer. I've read a little bit about it, I think I'll pass on that one. Whether this was pluralism, say, the way the late Roman period was or whether it's something else I don't know. The inferior status of Christians and Jews legally compared to Muslims may have created a different situation. I don't know. I'll pass on that one.

On Turkey, about which I know a good deal – we had a project in Turkey. I think what you have is a clash of two fundamentalisms – one Islamic and one secularist, Kemalist – and I think the present government is treading a very iffy and difficult and intelligent middle path between those two. And, so far at least, the secularist elite centered in the military has played along with this. How this will develop in the future, I don't know. I'm saying nothing unusual if I say that I think Turkey is a very crucial experiment. If the experiment of this democratic Islamism succeeds, it will have a very big effect, and if it fails, it will also have a very big effect. And right now, it's very much under stress.

**E.J. DIONNE, THE WASHINGTON POST:** You can talk about Egypt if you like. (Laughs.) I have two geographical questions. The first goes back to Jay's question on Europe, which is not a monolith. You said France is kind of the extreme case with *laïcité* and secularization imposed from above, whereas I was thinking Germany, by contrast, is a place where the main deal that had to be done was to get Protestants and Catholics to live together, and their sort of the whole system of governance of religious matters really accepts pluralism in a deep way, even with sort of public subsidies. I'm curious if you could talk about differences across Western European countries.

And secondly, where does China fit into all this? If I were holding on to the old secularization theory, I think I'd look at China and Russia – partly because of all those years of Marxism, but also because the Chinese tradition is quite different from a lot of the other religious traditions – and say this is an awfully big part of the globe both geographically and in terms of population where the secularization theories may prove right after all. There's a question mark at the end of that thought. (Laughs.)

**BERGER:** Well, let me try and answer you in reverse order. I don't think either Russia or China supports secularization theory. In Russia we've had a project focused on the Russian Orthodox Church. My impression is that there is a genuine religious revival in Russia, most of it Eastern Orthodox in character. Yes, you have a secular part of the population but it's shrinking. You get high majorities of people who say they're Orthodox or they are Christian and that percentage is growing. And also it's now the regime that pushes it, the Putin regime, so I don't think Russia is a case.

China is, well – what do we know about China? We know that there's an explosion of Christianity all over the place. Much of it is semi-legal and unregistered and therefore it is difficult to measure. We didn't have a study of that sort in China – it would be hard to do, actually – but based on what I hear about China and what I've seen when I've been there I don't think this is secularization, and the elite is certainly no longer Marxist. I mean, Marxist anti-religion is no longer relevant, and they're increasingly interested in religion. I don't think China is a case either.

Now, your first part on Europe: yes, there are significant differences, and one can certainly take the German model. It has an easier time dealing with pluralism. You don't have this *laïcité* ideology that the French do and so do the British. So, take Germany: Until recently, the big problem with immigration was – how should I put it – what is a black Bavarian? And there are increasing numbers of black Bavarians, who wear lederhosen and talk in Bavarian dialect, but they're black. Well, the status of black Bavarians could be handled within the framework of, let's say, liberal tolerance. We're all human beings, skin color doesn't matter. If you speak German and you follow our laws, welcome to the Federal Republic. Not everyone felt that way, but many people did.

The problem with at least some of the Muslim immigrants is that they don't want to be part of the Federal Republic, and the question of what is a Muslim Bavarian is more difficult to deal with within the framework of liberal tolerance. What if a Muslim Bavarian imports a 15-year-old wife from Turkey, or what if they don't want girls to take swimming lessons with boys? Not to mention the more serious issues like honor killings and so forth. So even in Germany I would say the model is under stress, and mainly because of the Islamic challenge.

**DIONNE:** In the U.S. model, a kind of pluralistic assimilation has always worked better in dealing with new religious minorities, particularly Muslims. Where do you see the European model going in searching for ways of doing this, because it is radically changing politics in a lot of places, particularly in the Netherlands?

**BERGER:** I think basically most Europeans don't know where it's going. They're experimenting, and in the Netherlands – well, first of all they were very proud of their multiculturalism and they are very worried about that now. But they also refer to their pillarization system, that religious peace was established in the Netherlands by having four parallel communities: Calvinist, Liberal Protestant, Catholic and humanist. They had separate schools, separate everything, and the civic peace was maintained by the elites of those four pillars, as they call them. But again, some people have suggested Islam should now be another pillar, but some of the Muslims don't want to be part of this Dutch pillar. They want some kind of Shariah, and that's incompatible with the pillar system. So the impression I get in Holland, where I was just a few weeks ago and where I talked to relevant people, is a lot of uncertainty and confusion.

**JANE LITTLE, BBC:** Thank you, E.J. You saved me a dilemma there because I have a dozen questions to ask related to that, but I'll stick to the Catholic Church. You mentioned the Catholic Church – very interesting history with the relationship with modernity and alternative battles with them and then accommodating. And I'm wondering where you see the role of Pope Benedict right now? Before he was elected, he announced that his battle against relativism, which he often seems to equate with secularism in Europe, would be key. Where does he fall in your spectrum of relativism to fundamentalism? Is his notion of an ideal Christian community standing up for Truth with a capital T – is that micro-totalitarianism or is it something different?

**BERGER:** No, no. I think since Vatican II, except for some splinter groups like Cardinal Lefevre and people like that, you cannot call Catholicism fundamentalist. And I don't think Benedict – I mean, he has a very different personality from his predecessor, but he's following the same line, which I think is a very intelligent middle ground. On the one hand, he is affirming the truth of Catholicism. How could he do otherwise given his job? (Laughter.) So he's certainly not a relativist. But on the other hand, first of all, he has a strong commitment to religious freedom, now grounded theologically, not just pragmatically. And also I would say an openness to dialogue, to discussion, which you can't call that fundamentalist – no, not at all. I mean, the change in the Catholic Church has been remarkable.

The only time in my life that I was ever arrested was as a very young man, I was a tourist in Spain. This was under the Franco period. And I went for a walk one evening in a small Andalusian town, dressed only in a sports shirt, which is relevant to the story, when it must have been Corpus Christi because a parade came by with a priest carrying the host and soldiers carrying their helmets under their arms, with fixed bayonets on their rifles marching in a sort of slow step. Everyone around me sank to their knees, and I didn't. I just stood very respectfully. The whole parade stopped. The priest pointed at me and two policemen came and took me away. (Laughter.) Now, nothing terrible happened to me. Unfortunately, I didn't have my passport with me because it was at the hotel, and they didn't believe me that I was not Spanish. But when I could prove I was not Spanish, they let me go. It was for a moment rather frightening. This is unthinkable today – absolutely unthinkable. The Catholic Church nowhere in the world would have that kind of attitude.

**PETER STEINFELS, THE NEW YORK TIMES:** Did you tell them? (Laughter.)

**BERGER:** I told them I was evangelical, but that was unimportant. I'd recently become an American citizen. I said I'm Norte Americano and they think these people are heretics anyway, so that's OK. (Laughter.)

**LITTLE:** Did the Pope see his vision of secularism as being a very particular understanding of an ideology that's anti-religious in some way and must be stood up to?



**BERGER:** I think he's empirically correct. There is a secularist ideology, very powerful in Europe that is opposed to Christianity. I'm no Roman Catholic. I'm no great admirer of Mr. Ratzinger, but no, I think he's perfectly correct. There is that thing called secularism, and it can be very fundamentalist.



**MARK PINSKY, ORLANDO SENTINEL:** Professor, I have three quick questions. Among some evangelicals, in particular Southern Baptist Convention, the term tolerance that you mentioned has become a signifier for theological equivalence, and thus they reject it. I'd like you to talk on that if you would.

Next, regarding the market economy: the mindset, the disconnect between the Vatican and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops over the clergy abuse scandal where the leadership in the Vatican was operating in a sort of monopoly environment for religion, which is to say Italy didn't seem to get what the U.S. bishops got. We operate in a market economy in our denominationalism, and the longer they tarried in responding to the clergy abuse scandal, the worse it got for American Catholics who were in this competitive situation.

And finally number three, regarding globalization, your take on the north-south split within the worldwide Anglican community over the sexuality issues?

**BERGER:** Let me begin do it in reverse order. What's happening with the Anglican Communion, I guess if you're not a member of it, is hilarious. (Laughter.) Because you had progressive Anglicans in England and the United States and Australia saying we have to listen to the voices of the third world. That's a very important progressive Christian position. Well, now the voices of the third world are very loud. They say homosexuality is a sin, abortion is murder, et cetera, and they don't like what the third world is saying. (Laughs.) So I don't know what's going to happen. Since the majority of Anglicans now live in Africa and Asia, Latin America – well, mainly Africa and Asia, I don't know what's going to happen. The beginnings of a schism.

On the sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, I don't know that much about how Rome's reacting to it – certainly reluctantly. Rome always takes a long time for everything. It usually takes about 500 years before someone is beatified – they do not do it very fast. I don't know what to say about this. What was your first question?

**CROMARTIE:** About the Southern Baptist.

**PINSKY:** Yes, the tolerance being –

**BERGER:** Oh, tolerance being the same. Well, yes I've heard that from evangelical circles and I think it's an unfortunate understanding of tolerance. Tolerance doesn't have to mean relativism. That's exactly my point. One should find a position that is open-minded and engages other world views openly but also makes some claims to truth. And if one doesn't do that, one is actually committing an institutional suicide, because what's the point of belonging to a community that affirms nothing? We were talking about the Unitarian jokes at dinner last night. (Laughs.) I guess the Unitarian –

**CROMARTIE:** Can you tell us one?

**BERGER:** Some of my best friends are Unitarians in Boston. I like them in many ways, but they represent absolutely nothing. Well, my favorite Unitarian joke, which was told to me by a Unitarian minister in Boston is: What's the beginning of the Unitarian version of the Lord's Prayer? To whom it may concern. (Laughter.) There is a market niche for Unitarianism for people who define themselves as seekers, OK? So the seekers get together and seek. But it's not a very promising position, with whatever openness or doubt or hesitation. Unless a religious community has something to affirm, it has no *raison d'être*.



**KATHY SLOBOGIN, CNN PRESENTS:** You've characterized modernity as more choice. I'm wondering why in the United States, which is arguably the most modern country in the world, so many people seem to be choosing a form of religion – conservative Christian evangelism – that seems to be about less choice, more orthodoxy, more absolutism, or is that a misconception?

**BERGER:** (Audio break) – and evangelicalism certainly is not taken for granted in many places, maybe some small communities in Georgia where everybody who's anybody is a Southern Baptist, but that's not very common anymore. So, it's a choice. But why should it

be a more closed choice – It's a different choice. No, I don't think –

**CATHY LYNN GROSSMAN, USA TODAY:** You don't think it's a more orthodox choice, the literal inerrancy of the Bible, the exclusivity of it?

**BERGER:** Look, there are certain dogmas in the evangelical worldview, which are rather rigid, for example, the notion of the Bible. There are elements in the worldview of secular intellectuals in America which are equally rigid, for example in gender roles, and voicing – I'm not saying this is my position – doubt about same sex marriage at the Harvard faculty club is about equal to questioning the literal interpretation of the Bible at the faculty club of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. [In response to concerns expressed by some members of the Baylor faculty, Berger has issued a correction (/docs/?DocID=180) .] And I don't know how to choose between which is more rigid. Both are very rigid. Yes.

**GROSSMAN:** There's certainly more growth. There're more people choosing the evangelism than there are Harvard professors. I'm just wondering: How do you relate that growth to modernity – to the increase in pluralism? Is there a connection there?

**BERGER:** Well, the growth of evangelicalism in America has been partly demographic because they have more children, while within the Protestant community, mainline Protestants don't have as many children. So there are more and more evangelicals around. There are also some conversions, some people moving into those churches, but I don't see there's any particular reason one has to explain this. Look, in terms of the American Protestant scene, which is the most vibrant religious community, the others are rather pale by comparison. This is lively, it's robust, people affirm something, and they create strong communities. By comparison, the average Lutheran or Episcopal Church or whatever is a pretty feeble operation. That people attractive something that's vibrant and affirms something, I don't find difficult to understand. Now, I can't make that affirmation, but that's my problem, a personal problem, but I don't see it as a difficult thing to explain.



**GROSSMAN:** There seems to be a numerical growth in the number of people who call themselves evangelical, but when you take apart the beliefs that they put underneath that label, are they actually following some of these beliefs? I mean, you do survey after survey and a huge number of evangelicals say all good people go to heaven. If you parse apart their beliefs, it turns out that they've taken the banner label, but they haven't actually taken on these specific religious requirements of that label. I think that there are just more people using the label.

**BERGER:** Well, look, that's true of every community. Way back, one of the early Catholic sociologists of religion in America, Joseph Fichter, did a study of Catholic belief and practice, and it turns out that most Catholics didn't believe what the Church wanted them to believe and didn't do what the Church wanted them to do. There's a disconnect between official positions and popular practice, I would say, in every religious community. I don't think it's any stronger among evangelicals, but what I would say – well, if you go to an evangelical church, you know it's

an evangelical church no matter what people say or they believe. It has a certain vibrant quality which is there, and I think, is shared by people who call themselves evangelical even if they don't believe in the literal inerrancy of the Bible or some other official doctrine, let's say, of the Southern Baptist Convention or whatever denomination they belong to. I think it's not unimportant if people call themselves that. It refers to something real.

**PETER BERKOWITZ, HOOVER INSTITUTION:** It seemed to me that your talk began on a bright note, but it ended on a kind of dark note. On the one hand, we live in an age of globalizing pluralism. This elevates choice and makes religious affiliation voluntary. On the other hand, globalizing pluralism seems to launch this dangerous dialectic of fundamentalism and relativism. I was wondering whether you've identified any moral, political or sociological factors that prevent this good thing – globalizing pluralism which elevates individual choice and social, political and moral factors – from generating these extreme reactions?

**BERGER:** Well, I would say that institutionally the most important thing that prevents the extreme reactions is democracy, and Turkey again would be a good example. If you can take a community, in this case Turkish Islam, which is in danger of becoming a fundamentalist, aggressive, militant thing, and induce them in some way to participate in the democratic game of mutual civility, you have done something very important.

And I think it's not only in the Muslim world; for example, it's a very real struggle in Russia. But I would say probably in terms of the world situation the most important thing that's going on right now in this area is a struggle for the soul of Islam. Who's going to win in terms of most of the Muslim world? The fundamentalists or people like the Turkish democratic Islamists? And I don't know how to predict this, so I'm not necessarily gloomy, but I think there are some very real dangers there.

But it's not just Islam; in Russia, for example, there is a strong tendency to try and create an Orthodox Russia with diminished rights. It's already on the way since the 1997 law on religion. I don't know if you would agree with this, but –

**BERKOWITZ:** So do you see extremism as a reaction to globalizing pluralism?

**BERGER:** Oh, yes. Absolutely. In Turkey, who were the young women who insist on going around with the veils? They're the children of Kemalist parents.

**LITTLE:** A quick follow-on from that. Do you bother to distinguish between a rise in religiosity and a rise in the use of religion as an ideological tool here, or is it irrelevant?

**BERGER:** I don't get your question.

**LITTLE:** Well, if we're talking about the apparent rise in militant Islam as a reaction to globalization, do you attempt to distinguish whether it is a genuine rise in religiosity that we're seeing in various parts of the Muslim world or whether it is just a use by certain militant forces of religion as an ideological tool, or is that distinction completely irrelevant?

**BERGER:** Well, I think the distinction is quite relevant. It's a little difficult to establish. How do you determine empirically what is genuine and what is not? Look, if you take Muslim examples, in Turkey it is my impression that there's a genuine Muslim revival. It's genuine in the sense it's not just politically manipulated, it's people who want to have Islam as an organizing principle in their lives, for religious reasons.

On the other hand, there are other situations where I think religion is manipulated. Take the situation in Bosnia, where you had a very tolerant, open-minded Islam. And as a result of the conflicts, there a more militant thing appeared. It was at least partly manipulated by Saudi influences or whatever. So I think they're not necessarily contradictory. In other words, you can have a genuine movement that then becomes a political tool for somebody.

**PAUL RICHTER, LOS ANGELES TIMES:** I wonder if over time the collision of these religious views with the mass media – doesn't that mean that the doctrines will become more like each other, that there'll be a filing down of the sharp edges?

**BERGER:** Well, both could happen, and in a way the market metaphor is quite useful here. On the one hand, the market produces standardization, OK?

**RICHTER:** This is standardization?

**BERGER:** Standardization, yes. What's the real difference between different brands of toothpaste? They may all basically be alike, just the label differs. On the other hand, if you want to sell a particular item, you have to have marginal differentiation. Why should one buy your product and not somebody else's? So I think both are happening simultaneously, and on the one hand you do have the hard edges are being smoothed out – ecumenism in a very broad sense. On the other hand, you can't smooth them out completely or you smooth yourself out of existence. So you have a reaffirmation, say within the Christian world, of denominational identities, and at the same time people sort of become a little smoother in their relations with each other.

**BYRON YORK, NATIONAL REVIEW:** (Off mike) – mentioning that it was unfortunate that some Muslims didn't subscribe or subscribed to the reconquista idea, you really didn't talk about religiously inspired terrorism and what it does to pluralistic societies. As you were talking, I was thinking about the incident in the Minneapolis airport a while back: As everybody was waiting to get on the plane, the imams were kind of extravagantly praying, doing things that you could reasonably interpret suspiciously. I wondered if you could just talk a little bit about what happens to a society that's trying to be good and pluralistic, and yet they're afraid that there are people that they're supposed to accept who are trying to kill them.

**BERGER:** I would say both in the United States and in Europe governments on the whole have been very, very careful in not provoking the idea that they are basically opposed to Islam. In fact, it's rather remarkable how careful they've been, including the Bush administration after 9/11. So far, I would say the threat of terror has not fundamentally undermined the religious tolerance and freedom of Western democracies. This could change. Imagine one major attack on a European capital or imagine even worse, the use of weapon of mass destruction in a terror act in the United States or Europe, and things could become very ugly indeed. I don't know what else to say about it.

**YORK:** (Off mike) – in a society like the United States?

**BERGER:** Well, in the extreme case, very harsh measures against anyone who's Muslim. The idea that something like the internment of Japanese during World War II could never happen again, I think, is a little optimistic. One atomic weapon used on a major American city and I think even the ACLU is going to become very muted if you have harsh measures against Muslims. This is what I mean by "could become very, very ugly." I don't know what else to say. Let's hope it doesn't happen.

**PETER STEINFELS, THE NEW YORK TIMES:** I just wanted to press or explore this question: the relationship between pluralism, which you say is a necessary dimension of modernization, and secularization, which you say is not, a necessary dimension. It seems to me that as I read your thinking about this over the years, there was a time, which you've now recanted and which you thought that pluralism did contribute to secularization –

**BERGER:** Yes.

**STEINFELS:** – at least in the sense of a lessening of the intensity or the centrality or the pervasiveness or the certainty in which people held religious beliefs, given the fact that they had to live with their neighbors who were good folks.



In the face of this loss of taken-for-grantedness, people reasserted a stronger particular religious identity, and this leaves us where we are now. But I would like to raise the argument or the literature of Christian Smith who has done this. Maybe this challenges the notion of the United States population as a heavily religious population, but he directed this massive national study of youth and religion and, of course, he had a position in regards to the secularization theory much like yours, I believe. He was critical of it, but having done this massive research with thousands of survey forms and hundreds of interviews, he came to the conclusion that although there were real differences in the religiosity between evangelicals, Mormons, Catholics, black Protestants, et cetera, he ended up calling what he found a “benign whateverism,” and described the God of young people as a combination between a kind of cosmic butler and therapist.

And he’s written an essay for a book just coming out about passing on the tradition to younger generations in which he seems to be having second thoughts about the relationship between pluralism and secularization, and suggesting that it may be more powerful a corrosive force on at least traditional religious belief and practice. I just wonder what you might make of this set of second thoughts and whether the relationship is more problematic.

**BERGER:** Look, every social science proposition is problematic, and I think being an empirical sociologist means in principle you’re always willing to change your mind. I’m perfectly willing to change my mind again if I’m forced to do so by data. I don’t think these data would make me change my mind. They deal with youth, and youth is always peculiar. And I wonder if you had taken a similar survey in whatever period you want to call highly religious – I don’t know, the High Middle Ages of Christendom – you would have also found that young people had concerns other than God. So I don’t know whether this really proves anything very conclusive. I don’t think it reestablishes secularization theory, but I may be wrong.

**STEINFELS:** I guess what I’m pressing on is not necessarily a notion of secularization theory as regarding the public or personal disappearance of religion in a rather blanket sense, but the question of whether pluralism contributes to a mutation of religion in which it persists, but is really increasingly marginal to the important choices people make about their daily lives or the big choices in the course of their lives. I think that’s the question that –

**BERGER:** OK. You’re using two words that I think are interesting: mutation and marginal. Does pluralism lead to a mutation? Yes, but not necessarily a secularizing mutation. And I would say what pluralism does is not so much change the “what” of religious belief, but the “how” of religious belief. In other words, a person may affirm very Orthodox positions in his or her tradition – Catholic or Jewish or whatever – but it no longer has the kind of taken-for-granted certainty that this individual’s grandparents might have. In that sense it’s a mutation in the way in which religious beliefs are held, rather than the content of those beliefs.

**STEINFELS:** One of the things that struck me in our discussions: we talk a lot about beliefs and as though these were propositional.

**BERGER:** No.

**STEINFELS:** I know you know that isn’t the case, but just our language hasn’t incorporated the extent to which religious practice and habits of prayer and mental structures and relationships with people and so on all come into the picture, and it seems to me it’s on that level where the pluralism can raise issues as much as on the level of beliefs when we –

**BERGER:** No, no. I completely agree. I should have beliefs and practices that can also be taken for granted. I mean, practices can. But others – that’s a mutation, but you say marginal – I don’t see that this mutation necessarily marginalizes religion. And you can still have even a very strong public role of religion when this mutation has in fact occurred. And in certain European countries, you mentioned Germany, that’s still the case. One concept – the person I’m working with on this book on European secularity is – some of you may know her work, Grace Davie (<http://www.huss.ex.ac.uk/sociology/staff/davie/index.php>) .

**CROMARTIE:** We had her here.

**BERGER:** Oh, you had her here? Yes. Sociologist of religion in Britain, she has coined a very nice phrase, “vicarious religion,” by which she means people who don’t go to church or voice strong religious beliefs themselves, but they want the church to be there. It has a symbolic value and she, I think correctly, says that’s not unimportant. And she mentions a crisis – whereby suddenly the church becomes central. One thing that she apparently studied in some detail was in Sweden – again, a very secularized society. Remember a few years ago this ferry sank in the Baltic Sea with Swedish tourists and several hundred people drowned – a big national tragedy. Suddenly, the Lutheran Church of Sweden became the official mourner for the society, it took on the symbolic role and it’s not unimportant. So even in this public way, I think religion is not necessarily marginalized.



**ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE, THE ECONOMIST:** I wanted to ask you about the breeding wars. I was recently at the Values Voters Conference in Washington –

**CROMARTIE:** Can you say that again?

**WOOLDRIDGE:** The breeding wars. There was a succession of speakers and I was looking at their biographies and they helpfully listed the number of children they had. There were seven, eight, nine, 10, 14 – one of them had 14 children. I think that the Christian right may have had a few set backs in the 2006 elections, but there’s

going to be a lot more of them around in the long term. (Laughter.) If you look, it does seem to be a correlation between fertility and religiosity in the sense that Americans are better at breeding than Europeans, Muslim immigrants are better at breeding than indigenous Europeans, and within the United States the more religious people are having more children.

Why is that, and doesn’t it mean that the debate about religion and secularization is basically solving itself because there won’t be enough secularists around – they can’t be bothered to breed – so they won’t inherit the modern world? (Laughter.)

**BERGER:** Well, Adrian, the short answer is I honestly don’t know what the relation is, but the empirical correlation is there. I mean, George Weigel (<http://www.eppc.org/scholars/scholarID.14/scholar.asp>) just wrote a book on Europe, in which he claims Europe is going to hell because no one has children except Muslims. I mean, the argument would be – it’s very hypothetical as far as I’m concerned – religion gives you a more optimistic view of the future and therefore you trust God to take care of your children. But I don’t know if that is actually so. I’m aware of the data you cite, but I don’t quite know how to interpret them.

**ALAN COOPERMAN, THE WASHINGTON POST:** I noticed when you spoke about fundamentalism, you gave two models and one is more modest and achievable than the other. When you spoke about relativism, you did not give any differentiation within the ranks of relativists. I wanted to ask whether it’s not possible to have a greater and lesser jihad of relativism, and whether one ought not to speak up in favor of some way of the greater jihad of relativism, or whether in fact, you think it is inevitably a kind of sliding slope and once you step on that slope, you devolve into that area that you described as dangerous for morality because somehow or another once you get on a relative slope then clearly no morality could possible hold – there’s nothing to stand by?

That’s one question, and there’s a related question, at least I think they’re related. I noticed also when you spoke about Mormonism growing very rapidly, you did not state that the reason is because of the divine truths in the Book of Mormon; and when you spoke about the growth of pentecostalism, you did not explain pentecostalism is growing because of the fundamental truths that pentecostalists believe in. In fact, as you described the reasons for the growth of these groups, you’ve mentioned no doctrine at all, and you spoke about the warmth of the religious expression and practice, and you spoke, of course, about the strength of the community they’ve created, both the Mormons and the others – the things they do for each other, the sense of solidarity, et cetera. I think that that is in line with a lot of contemporary thinking about what makes some religious groups successful and others not successful.

But then when you spoke about the decline, essentially, of mainline Protestantism in the United States, you directly linked it to the lack of doctrine. So their doctrine seems to matter, so they have nothing that they seem to stand for. So this doctrine or lack of doctrine accounts for the decline of mainline Protestantism in the United States, but doctrine has nothing to do with the success of these other movements?

That ties in to the first question: Is it not possible that the decline of mainline Protestantism in the United States is more easily and better accounted for by the lack of warmth, the failure to create community and failure to do the kinds of things that have made these other movements so successful rather than the jihad of relativism that has taken hold?

And especially, isn't it possible that if there was a moderate jihad, a sort of moderate form of relativism, it would not be doctrinally sufficient for mainline Protestantism to believe in something, if only they had these other things going for them? Thank you.

**BERGER:** Well, I don't think I want to push the term "moderate relativist jihad" too far. (Laughter.) But look, I think I did not imply that it doesn't matter what people believe. With the pentecostals, doctrine is not essential in the sense that they are not interested in minutiae of theological interpretation. It is very different, for example, from old line Calvinists or Lutherans – that kind of thing – or Catholics where you have to believe a whole catalogue of things. But this does not imply that it is not important what they believe, and there are certain core beliefs in pentecostalism that I think are absolutely central to their success. And the core belief actually is what you see on bumper stickers all over Central America: Cristo salva et sana, Christ saves and heals; Christ as a powerful force, a supernatural force in the world which heals sickness and social problems and saves you forever. That's not a doctrine, but it's a basic affirmation of faith.

So I did not mean to imply this is not important at all, and with mainline Protestantism in its decline, I don't think I would say it has something to do with doctrine in the narrower sense. It has to do with the fact that it's very difficult to know what these denominations stand for in any sense. And I would say what has happened in mainline Protestantism is essentially two things. One, which is older, has become a psychologized, religion becomes a kind of therapy – there're some good studies of this going back to the '50s. Then after the '60s, it became politicized: Religion is about this or that political agenda. From an institutional point of view, it is a recipe for self-liquidation because you can have the therapy and you can have the politics without the Presbyterian Church which advocates it.

Now, in terms of relativism, should I have said there are different kinds of relativism? Yes, I think I should have said that, and you could differentiate between the relativism which is completely socially destructive like the example I gave: There's no way of really condemning rape. It's a matter of taste as it were, and a notion of morality that makes some strong moral affirmations but yet is open to variation and various particular moral judgments. So I take your point: I haven't done it, but one could do that and might be useful to do so.

**ROSS DOUTHAT, THE ATLANTIC:** I wanted to ask about breeding too, but I guess I have a somewhat related question. Regarding Europe, one of the theories regarding secularization is that Europe in the last hundred years just hasn't had enough pluralism, and the sort of stultifying effect of having state churches in different countries has had an inevitably negative impact on Christianity. And I wonder if you've seen any data to indicate that in your research. You talked a little bit about an up-tick in religious belief, but has the spread of Islam in Europe had an impact on Christian practice there? I've seen a couple of studies, maybe it was only one that said, in England if you look at whether white, European, English people identify themselves as Christian tends to be determined in part by how many Muslim neighbors they have. If you have more Muslim neighbors, you're more likely to identify yourself as Christian rather than secular. And I wonder if you've seen data suggesting a similar thing, and whether Europe is a case where pluralism may be the necessary condition for a religious revival of some kind?



**BERGER:** I haven't seen data of the kind you mentioned, the more Muslims around the more people go to church or anything like that. I mean, I wrote a term paper way back in graduate school about Montesquieu's Persian Letters, which was a fictitious book about two Persians who go to Paris and write back about how strange the French are, and the question they keep addressing is "how can one be a Persian?" that they hear from the French. But what Montesquieu really was writing about was: "What does it mean to be French?"

And in that sense, I think the Islamic challenge is very basic. Back to the example I gave: If you ask the question, "What is a Muslim Bavarian?" you're almost inevitably driven to ask "What is a Bavarian in the first place?" Ancestry, language, dress, lederhosen, what is the essential criterion? In that sense, I think one can notice a change in Europe, but it has not as yet affected the secularity of the continent. This may yet happen.

**KAREN TUMULTY, TIME:** Would you mind talking just a little bit about how pluralism plays itself out in electoral politics? Whether it's as the result of people demanding a religiosity of their leaders or I mean, the storyline for 2008 already is, as written by my colleague Mike Allen (<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1562941-1,00.html>), will Americans accept a Mormon president if Mitt Romney runs or is this going to get in the way of his candidacy? Does this open people up to exploring the religiosity of their leaders more and accepting it, or does it make them more suspicious of it?

**BERGER:** Well, I mean, around this table are some real experts in American public opinion and political polls. I mean, I hesitate to say anything, but –

**CROMARTIE:** But go ahead. (Laughter.)

**BERGER:** I don't know whether Mormonism is going to be a factor with Romney. I have no idea. Maybe yes, maybe no. Certainly what press reports about these trials of polygamists aren't going to help Romney if people think that he's a polygamist – which would be very unfair.

But in terms of the politics of pluralism in America – look, let me go back to something I said before, that as far as I know, every bit of data indicates that most Americans are not extreme on the neuralgic issues including abortion, you name it. They're somewhere in the middle. What has happened I think is that almost by accident the two parties have become identified with rather extreme groups of activists, and again, there's no terrible mystery about this. I mean, activists on either side of the cultural conflict are people who spend a lot of time working for political causes, they write checks, they ring doorbells, they seal envelopes, while more normal people have more interesting things to do in the evening. (Laughter.)

So at that point, of course, I think it happened that the Democrats got one bunch of them, and the Republicans got another bunch. So by now I think the perception by religious voters in America that the Democratic Party has a secularist bias is not unfounded; at least in the official vision – image of the party. Apparently the recent data that Pew has produced on the '06 elections (</docs/?DocID=174>) seem to verify that across the board, the more religious people are, the more they tend to vote Republican, which I can understand.

I think it could have happened the other way around. I see nothing inherent in the history of those two parties that the Democrats couldn't have become the "Goddess" and the Republicans the secularists. It didn't happen that way. I don't know what else to say. There doesn't seem to be any change happening in this.

**DAN GILGOFF, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT:** If you see the United States as a great laboratory for religious pluralism and pluralism of other sorts, and as you said at the outset of your deliberations, one of the imperatives for that kind of pluralism is an exchange and opportunities for the disparate camps to influence and engage with one another. And you referred to the secular elite in this country – in fact, the secular component of America seems to be among the fastest growing religious traditions, even more than say, evangelical Protestantism. And I'm wondering if you see healthy conversations, as you said earlier, as being one of the imperatives for a pluralistic society? Are those conversations actually transpiring between those two camps? You insinuated earlier



that the secularists in Europe have a fundamentalist tendency almost in line or commensurate with what some evangelical Christians exhibit. How important is that conversation, that exchange? To what extent is it happening? Is it happening more?

**BERGER:** I think that exchange will be very important, and Michael knows we're working on something along those lines. I think a conversation between the growing Evangelical intelligentsia and the secularist part of the American elite is very important. As far as I can see, it's not taking place. I have nothing in principle against Harvard, but I could mention the Harvard faculty club because it's a

useful image. (Laughter.) I mean, the way in which people in the Harvard faculty club think about Evangelicals is barefoot people on tobacco row that sleep with their sisters – (laughter) – which was never very accurate and is certainly grossly inaccurate now. I think that a conversation between these two worlds would be very, very healthy. I don't think it's happening much, and of course the demonization is mutual. The Evangelicals see the secularists as sort of very evil people and vice versa. Yes, I would like to see some dialogue along those lines.

What's very ironic about mainline Protestantism and the School of Theology at Boston University is a perfect example. Its previous dean – he's now no longer dean, though he is still on the faculty – Bob Neville, tried to build a whole curriculum around inter-religious dialogue arguing, I think correctly, for Christian theology, the challenge of other world religions is crucial today. He would say that you cannot do Christian theology without dialogue with Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and so forth.

The irony is that while mainline Protestants, – well, Roman Catholics are a somewhat different situation – but mainline Protestants are interested in dialogue with everybody from Tibetan monks to African sorcerers but they don't have dialogue with American evangelicals who are next door, and that's absurd.

**GILGOFF:** A quick follow-up. You said there's a failure of that dialogue to develop so far. Do you see any early symptoms or manifestations of what you would consider to be the undesirable or even pernicious results of not having that dialogue? I mean, what is the danger there and do you see any early signs that those dangers are indeed kind of taking root?

**BERGER:** Well, I don't think it's an immediate danger like the civil war in Lebanon. It's not that kind of danger, but on the other hand, if you reflect on it, depending on how you count it, there are about 80 million Americans who consider themselves Evangelicals, and if they are shut out of respectable intellectual discourse, that is not a healthy situation. So in that sense I think it's a danger. It's a breakdown of the kind of public discourse that a healthy democracy should have.

**ERIC GORSKI, DENVER POST:** In your talk, you were saying that, as these different religious groups talk to each other, they're going to influence each other, and I think one of the examples you gave was in Boston with the Catholic Church. Perhaps this was an example of being more attuned to the laity than they perhaps were before. I'm wondering if you could cite some other examples in this country where you've seen that influence.



And also we've talked about the growth of pentecostalism and Mormonism. I'm wondering if, given what you see as these dynamics, what other traditions might be exploding in the near future, other traditions beyond those two, and what groups you might see declining perhaps even more so than they are now?

**BERGER:** Well, globally the two big explosions are evangelical Protestantism and Islam. I have no question about that. Everything else is not as big. As to who would decline more, I'm not sure. The decline of mainline Protestantism seems to have been somewhat stopped. I mean, it doesn't seem to be getting much worse, at least in

most denominations. I don't know how to predict future developments. Any particular group you have in mind?

**CROMARTIE:** You're just trying to get ahead of the story, aren't you, Eric? (Laughter.)

**GORSKI:** I just like to predict the future.

**BERGER:** The Eastern Christian Orthodox is a very interesting case, and where I think there is a genuine revival. I would say it's a genuine revival in Russia. It's not doing badly in some of the Balkans. Is this a wave of the future? I don't know. There seem to be conversions to Orthodox Church in Africa; I don't know how big that is. Orthodoxy has a lot to offer when you look at what the package contains. But again, I wouldn't predict that; it's a possibility.

**GORSKI:** What about the first part of the question and the influence groups might have on other faith traditions? I mean, you've said that people are not going to change their "what" but their "how," maybe how they worship, how they practice. But do you see any shifts in the "what" in any tradition? Any possibility for that happening?

**BERGER:** Well, yes. When I gave the example of the laity in the Catholic Church and the Boston incident, I wasn't referring to the effect of other religious groups; I was referring to the voluntary character of Catholic allegiance. That makes the laity important. So it's not doctrine or teachings or whatever of the Church; it's the laity who becomes important because without the laity you won't have a Church, which didn't used to be the case. I mean, the laity was a more passive entity within the Church.

I mean, as a result of this pluralistic communication some doctrines, some teachings – I didn't use the word "doctrine" because I had trouble with it before, but some teachings become modified. I think it's happening within the evangelical community now – a belief in the literal inspiration of the Bible, or inerrancy, to use their term – becomes very difficult when you have higher education. So there's a certain dialogue taking place between young Evangelicals with college education and a dialogue between, let's say, what is considered intellectually respectable and their own previous beliefs. So this is happening, but I don't know what to add to this.

**ALLEN:** I'd just ask the professor really quickly to elaborate on your point that the Eastern Orthodox Church has a lot to offer in its package. What were you referring there when you were talking about the appeal of the Eastern Orthodox Church?

**BERGER:** Well, first of all, the liturgy is the most magnificent in the Christian world and that is still very powerful. If you look at the Orthodox Church in the United States, most of it is still ethnically defined, but you do have the OCA, the Orthodox Church in America, which has de-ethnicized itself and its liturgies are in English but it is still very traditional. Well, I'm friendly with the priest who runs the OCA Cathedral in Boston and he's Arab-American by background, but the congregation is about 50-50 people with ethnic orthodox background and people who come from elsewhere – Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, whatever. I've talked to some of them and it's very clear: The liturgy is absolutely essential.

In the old, probably legendary story of the conversion of Russia, the princes of Kiev decided, I think for political reasons, that it would be a good thing if the country became Christian. They had to decide between Rome and Constantinople, so they sent emissaries to both places. The emissaries in Constantinople had attended the liturgy at Hagia Sophia, and they came back and said, "We have experienced heaven on earth." Then they decided to become Orthodox rather than Roman. I think that is still very, very powerful.

**DIONNE:** Berger could do an excellent New York Magazine consumer guide to faith traditions. (Laughter.) What the package offers, drawbacks and a website to visit. (Laughter.) That was magnificent. I have long been and still am very into your book, *A Far Glory*. In the very final passages of that book, you have a wonderful phrase about how all believers operate under the burden of God's silence. And I've always thought that was the perfect expression of the complaint and the hope of the liberal Christian or the liberal believer. And so what I'd like you to do is to abandon your stance as a thoughtful social scientist and instead to speak as a thoughtful, theologically liberal Protestant believer, and to talk about your view of how liberal theology is important or relevant to this moment of radical pluralism that you've described so well.



**BERGER:** My last book tries to do that. It's called *Questions of Faith* (<http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/book.asp?ref=9781405108478&site=1>) and was recently published by Blackwell and I've gone a little further than in the book you mentioned. I write too many books. (Laughter.) I would say something very Lutheran here: The central affirmation of the Reformation was an enormous act of liberation, expressed in the phrase "sola fide" – we are saved by faith alone. Now, this had a lot to do with notions of justification, which I don't find terribly convincing at this point. But that my religion is based on faith and not on knowledge, I find absolutely central. That means it is not based on certainty. And faith by definition means "I don't know." I believe, I gamble, I decide to affirm this, for good reasons but not out of certainty.

Now, I find this personally an intellectually unavoidable position. I'm profoundly skeptical of every person who claims he or she is certain about his or her religion. I acknowledge there are such people who may have had some experience that they find absolutely convincing. I'm skeptical about that experience and if an angel appeared to me tonight, I think tomorrow morning I'd call a psychiatrist. (Laughter.)

I have an old friend who is a Lutheran theologian who doesn't agree with my view of Lutheranism and is very orthodox, and he said that he had never had any serious doubts about the basic elements of the Christian faith. He taught mostly in secular universities, and said he was surrounded by secularism. He tried to have doubt, but he didn't succeed. (Laughter.) And I take it from him, but I have to say, "Well, thank you, very interesting; it's not my case."

So I realize that that kind of position is weak compared to someone who claims certainty – well, too bad. That's all I can do, and I'm not alone. I mean, there are huge numbers of people with that kind of orientation. Maybe I'm going back to the point about whether there are different kinds of relativism. You might call this a kind of relativism, but it's not the kind where I can no longer say anything that I claim to be true. I don't know if that answers your question.

**DIONNE:** That's inspiring. I want you to go on. Go ahead.

**COOPERMAN:** Well, just a point on that. Wouldn't that degree of certainty or uncertainty, but having something to say, be sufficient for mainline Protestantism? Why do you say that faiths built on that degree of uncertainty have nothing to affirm and therefore are bound to commit institutional suicide?

**BERGER:** Look, one shouldn't say this, but please read my last book because I try to answer this over a few hundred pages –

**CROMARTIE:** Tell us the title again.

**BERGER:** It's called *Questions of Faith*, published by Blackwell about a little over a year ago.

**COOPERMAN:** You know, why isn't that sufficient enough as for the "what" – if you had the "how," as you spoke of it earlier.

**BERGER:** Because the mainline churches aren't doing that mostly. I mean, if you listen to sermons in mainline churches, they're mostly either rather trivial moral preachment or they are therapeutic – religion is good for you – or in many cases they are political. In the case of mainline Protestantism, they are usually left-of-center politics. That is not what I mean by sola fide, in fact there's no "fide" there. Even if one likes either the psychology or the politics that is being propagated here, it's self-liquidating. I mean, I can hate Bush without going to an Episcopal church, and I can be interested in my mental health without going to an Episcopal church.

**COOPERMAN:** I guess a counterexample that I would give would be the liberal theological side of the emergent church, which has no more, as I see it, "what" than what you're describing, but has much more of the "how." Its warm worship creates a strong community, great sense of solidarity and is growing very rapidly, but I don't necessarily think that mainline Protestantism has nothing to say in terms of faith. I'm not sure that you do either. But if it had the "how," the "what" might be sufficient.

**BERGER:** Well, I mean that's obviously a question of how one sees mainline Protestantism and it has diversified, it's not monolithic. I mean, there are different branches, there are different denominations, but I think on the whole it's fair to say that in the mainline Protestantism, there's been a loss of religious substance, not just in terms of doctrine, but also in terms of what is being basically affirmed. I think that unless you have certain basic affirmations of faith, the whole operation becomes implausible. Now, E.J. asked a more theological question, let me amplify my theological view of this, if you don't mind. I mean, I didn't promise. I want to be a sociologist, OK? (Laughter.)

**DIONNE:** I don't mind.

**BERGER:** The great Rabbi Hillel made a statement, which was quoted by Jesus as the meaning of Torah: "Love God above all and your neighbor as yourself" – which I think is an impossible demand, but leave that aside. I think the essence of Christianity can be affirmed even more shortly: "Christ is risen." Behind both the noun and the verb of this sentence is a lot of stuff.

That is the center. If that is not affirmed, Christianity becomes an uninteresting proposition. That statement might not be true, but that's what it seems to me is the sine qua non of a plausible Christian church, I mean, surely, people recite the Nicene creed, the Apostles' Creed or whatever they do, but as a central statement of what we are about, this has become rather limited in mainline Protestantism, certainly in the official denominations. You get local congregations where this is very much the case. Does that help?

**STEINFELS:** (Off mike) – I got an email from (inaudible) on his deathbed who had been a Lutheran, became Eastern Orthodox for some of the reasons you said and he was supposed to have said, "If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. If Christ is not risen, nothing else matters." And that summed up that –

**BERGER:** Well, the Apostle Paul said almost the same thing. There's a beautiful story about this from Soviet times. I read somewhere that there was some usual anti-religious campaign by the party and agitprop person was sent to a village and gave a one-hour lecture on scientific atheism; all the villagers had to listen to it. At the end of the lecture he said, "We are very tolerant here. The priest can have five minutes for a rebuttal." (Laughter.) The priest went up front and said he didn't need five minutes. He turned to the assembled village and said, "Christ is risen." And the villagers replied in the liturgical formula of Eastern liturgy: "He's risen indeed." That's all he said, and that was all necessary to say.

Now you can obviously write 100 books to elaborate what is meant by Christ, what is meant by the Resurrection and why is this important. But that is the core, and if that core is not being proposed, why get involved with this institution?

**TOLSON:** (Off mike) – not drop this, but it seems like it's really one of the core questions, and it seems to me what Alan is getting at is not quite satisfactorily answered, even theologically yet. I think there is a sense in which a lot of the mainline churches perhaps drop the main core teaching. But I think a lot did try precisely to grasp with bringing "Christ is risen" into the modern world, into a modern understanding. And that attempt was rejected, at least rhetorically, by the so-called fundamentalists of all kinds, and that rejection goes on. Ironically, I think the evangelical, fundamentalist, mega-churches are far more therapeutic often than the so-called mainline churches. I mean, they doctrinally are so all over the place that the wealth gospel, for example, which is just bizarre – but tremendously successful. But I think actually this has a lot to do with this current rise of interest in these atheists like Dawkins and Sam Harris and others. There is a sense that actually the secularist argument is very frail and vulnerable right now; particularly its scientific authority is so vulnerable and so dependant upon education, and bringing it up against faith traditions makes it seem to many of the atheists on the verge of extinction. They feel that there is no way of bringing rationality and religion together; that the so-called religious moderates make the world safe for the religious extremists – this is the Harris and Dawkins' argument.

I think they are wrong, but I think I understand where their argument is coming from. And again it seems to me related to this fact that the liberal traditions did try to come to terms with the meaning of "Christ is risen" or other core religious concepts in relation to what science and scientific understanding was doing. This is a very difficult

reconciliation. Maybe there is no reconciliation; it's living with the contradiction. But I think everyone fears it is such a difficult reconciliation or attempt at coexistence that the fundamentalists will ultimately prevail. And I wonder if you fear that.

**BERGER:** I doubt that there's a huge new interest in atheism. I mean, the couple of books that sell well have different ways of explaining this. I haven't read Harris; I've read Dawkins and I think it's a childish book. I mean, it's juvenile; it's not serious. That in the name of religion terrible things were done, we all know. If you look at the most terrible century in human history, which I think was the 20th century, most of the horrors were committed by people who were not religious at all. So I don't think this is serious.

Do I fear that fundamentalism will prevail? Well, the question is where? In the United States, I don't see any real danger. Islamic fundamentalism is a very real danger. And you get a lot – excuse me – in the liberal press, which I find kind of strange that Evangelical fundamentalism and Muslim fundamentalism are sort of seen as somehow equivalent, which is crazy. I don't know of any Pentecostals who are running planes into skyscrapers or cutting people's heads off. I mean, it's a very different phenomenon.

I don't see the demonization of the Christian right in America; it's not very plausible to me. It doesn't mean I agree with their positions, not at all, but I don't think it's a terrible danger. Islamic fundamentalism unfortunately is a danger and we may as well face up to it. That's why I said before, one of the really globally speaking crucial issues is the struggle – I used the phrase – “over the soul of Islam,” which is happening everywhere, even in Iran. I think all of us have an enormous stake in how this struggle is going to come out.

**TOLSON:** I would agree with you that it's far more acute in the world of Islam, but I think there is not at all the same kind of struggle with fundamentalism as elsewhere. But I do think that religious propositions are packaged as though they were scientific statements. That's the fundamentalists' appeal. If there is any universality to a fundamentalism, it's an actual sort of attempt. I got this from a Catholic theologian, Nicholas Lash, what really fundamentalism is about is an attempt to make religious propositions parallel or the same as scientific ones, and that this is why fundamentalism is a very modern phenomenon. It's a way of using religion to make statements of fact about the world as it is. And that's when it becomes dangerous.

I can see fundamentalists of non-Islamic stripes driving planes into buildings. They haven't done it yet, it doesn't mean that they won't. You have people hunting down, shooting people at abortion clinics and bombing people. There's been violence; it's not a monopoly of Islam.

**BERGER:** Yes, I was going to say it's not a very uncommon phenomenon. Well, look, I come originally from Vienna; in fact, I am Viennese, I'm Lutheran and I'm a sociologist. Those are three powerful traditions of pessimism. (Laughter.) I have a strong inclination toward paranoia – (laughter) – and I'm afraid of everything. Sure – (laughter) – these things could happen. I don't see them.

Hindu fundamentalism is a very dangerous business right now, but mainly in India, while Islamic fundamentalism is a danger in London. And there's Buddhist fundamentalism in Sri Lanka, there's Jewish fundamentalism in Israel. Nobody comes out pure out of this. But in the United States, I find it very difficult to regard evangelical fundamentalism, even if I disagree with it theologically, as a big danger. I can't see it. And also there are changes occurring, you mentioned the use of science.

I mean, a very interesting movement has happened in America in the evangelical world: the shift from creationism to intelligent design, which the court has decided is the same thing. It is not the same thing. I mean creationism basically denied evolution, which it seems to me impossible to do for a person who has any kind of knowledge of biology. Intelligent design does not deny evolution; it says that it's impossible to look at the evolutionary process without a mind behind it.

Now, I think then any religious person is going to say that. Christian, Jewish, Muslim, you name it. But the mistake they made they think this can be done scientifically. Well, no, it cannot be done scientifically because you cannot falsify it. But it's a very different thing from creationism. So you already see a shift here in the evangelical position

away from what I would call fundamentalism. I think a crucial question will be dealing with the Bible. One of the remarkable events in the history of religion was in 19th-century Protestantism, especially in theological faculties in Germany, when modern critical scholarship was first applied to the Bible, with very dramatic results. Protestantism managed to absorb this process without losing its core. I think Evangelicals will have to come to terms with this in a way that many of them have not yet come to terms, but I think are beginning to.

When I visited Baylor University a few months ago, I asked, “Well, do you use modern historical methods in teaching the Bible?” And I got a kind of wink: well, officially no, the higher criticism – they still use that old-fashioned term – is not allowed, but in fact they do it. So there’s a change occurring here which is interesting and I think important in terms of the dialogue that you brought up. [In response to concerns expressed by some members of the Baylor faculty, Berger has issued a correction (/docs/?DocID=180) .]

**RACHEL MARTIN, NPR:** I know you said that you didn’t necessarily want to get into this, but I’m going to push you a little bit on it. Getting back to the idea of pluralism in Europe, and if you accept the premise that the United States is somehow a model, albeit flawed, but a model of what a successful pluralistic society looks like, why doesn’t Europe work? Is it the lack of a cohesive narrative – a story that a place tells about itself that makes people who go there want to buy into a larger identity? Where have those countries failed in developing that narrative, how important is that narrative and do you see them trying to create some new identities or some new story about who they are as an immigrant culture?



**BERGER:** Now, look there are differentiations within Europe, but I think it’s fair to say that for most Europeans, when nationalism developed around 200 years ago, the nation was conceived of essentially in terms of a common ancestry: we, Germans; we, French; or whatever. France, perhaps more than any other major European country, also defined itself ideologically in terms of the republican ideals, but there were two Frances – conservative and republican – and they were at war with each other for many decades. Still, it’s difficult for European countries, even now, to define themselves in terms other than a common ancestry; that is to define themselves culturally or ideologically. That, I think, is beginning to happen and the challenge of Islam is very crucial here.

It’s fair to say that nobody in Europe could historically identify with the Americans’ slogan “E Pluribus Unum.” It’s just not there. Now, it has to be there now, but that’s what the struggle is about. In terms of the absorption of immigrants and how this relates to religion, the United States has been very lucky in two ways. One, the overwhelming majority of immigrants to the United States are Christian, OK, mostly Latin American, Catholic, increasingly Protestant, but they don’t raise the issue of Islam. And most Islamic immigration, which has been relatively small compared to Europe, came from professional upper middle class people in South Asia who assimilate rather easily – very different from these unfortunate young second-generation Moroccans in the suburbs of Paris.

I think the United States has been lucky not because it’s such a wonderful model, but because it has a history and has the cultural capacity to absorb people in a way that Europe hasn’t had to develop until now. And secondly, because the immigration has been easier culturally than what’s happening in Europe.

**PINSKY:** In the 1950s the sociologist Will Herbert wrote a fairly seminal book, at least for the time called Protestant, Catholic, Jew (<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/hfs.cgi/00/982.ctl>) and in that he argued – if I’m correct – that America’s civic religion is what he called faith in faith, which says it doesn’t matter what you believe in, but you must believe in something. And I’m wondering if you think –

**BERGER:** That’s actually a quote from Eisenhower.

**PINSKY:** Yes, right. And I’m wondering if you think that that is still the case generally and also if it’s true with regard to political candidates in the current atmosphere?

**BERGER:** Well, the trilogy, that triad that Herbert was talking about has expanded. I mean, now you talk about Abrahamic faiths which include Muslims, and then you've got Hindus and Buddhists, who want to be involved in this game. I think the situation has become more complicated. I still think there is a kind of civic faith or civic religion. They don't want to have an atheist as president. There should be some kind of religious underpinning of the society. I don't think that has changed.

**TOLSON:** The most distrusted group in America is atheists of any –

**BERGER:** In terms of voting for president, yes. So that may not be that much of a change.

**PINSKY:** I guess what prompted that was in the recent midterm elections we had a Democratic candidate who's a former Methodist minister, UMC minister, who was elected but not an Evangelical, but at least someone of pronounced mainline faith and he was successful –

**VAN BIEMA:** We've talked a lot about the parallels of fundamentalism, but regarding relativism and its parallels, the example that you used was the example of rape, which strikes me as a caricature. It seems possible to me that we've lived with monotheism for so long a time in western culture that not even the Harvard club or the French – (laughter) – would argue that relativistically speaking, rape is fine. I would like to ask, from your point of view, what the real-world objections to relativism are. I'm aware of the objections that are raised by some Evangelicals. You can talk about abortion. You can talk about pornography, if you like. I'm aware of possible objections by mainline Christians. You can talk about social action and where the basis for that is. I, myself, am bothered by the trivialization of the conversation in the U.S. just on a basic level. But you must have something that bugs you specifically and I'm wondering what about relativism? Where the relativism thing really hits in for you? (Laughter.)

**BERGER:** Well, you are right that I don't know of anyone who would say rape is OK. As a real-world example, let's go back to Europe and the issue of Islamic integration. Now, look at the debate in Holland. They were terribly proud of their multiculturalism, which in practice meant that the gender definitions of rural Morocco were accepted by the Dutch welfare state, and then increasingly people think this is not tolerable. Well, basically subjection of women to their husbands, brothers and fathers in the extreme case lead to a surprising number of honor murders. In less dramatic cases women were not allowed to have higher education and were beaten up by their husbands or brothers or fathers, and the state did very little to stop that because one had to respect their culture.

That, I think, is a very real danger and it's a danger of relativism, of a multiculturalism that becomes nihilistic in a way. And so now you begin to have the strong affirmation with political expression as well: We cannot tolerate this. There are certain Dutch values, European values – whatever phrase they may use – which don't permit this.

**VAN BIEMA:** I mean, any honor killing is one honor killing too many, any of these things that have been allowed to happen as you've said you would contend under the banner of relativism should not have happened. But I wonder whether those societies aren't capable of actually responding to those atrocities while becoming only slightly less relativistic. I'm very interested in the notion that relativism is the real bogeyman here.

**BERGER:** I want to suggest two bogeymen, not one, but I will insist on both. I grant you that there are a relatively small number of honor killings, though not as small as you might think. I mean, I've seen recent statistics issued from Germany, where there's a surprising number of women being killed usually by their brothers, which makes it particularly awful because of not even marrying but dating somebody or immodest behavior – that sort of thing.

**VAN BIEMA:** Do you think the Germans definitely let this happen because they're relativistic?

**BERGER:** Well, it was not strongly condemned. But I mean, much more common are the less dramatic forms of this kind of gender discrimination. Basically, a role defined for women as being first subjected to their fathers and then to their husbands and if they have neither fathers nor husbands, they are suspect as whores. That's not an unfair description of a certain ethos that many Muslims will tell you is not really Islamic, is not based on the Koran, which I'm willing to accept. But in fact, it is legitimated in Muslim religious terms, and that has been widely

tolerated. And people are beginning to say, no we cannot tolerate this, so it's not the bogeyman. I think there are certainly in Europe, in the face of some of this kind of behavior, there has been a relativistic attitude, which I find dangerous and wrong.



**BARBARA BRADLEY HAGERTY, NPR:** I'm trying to figure out how to ask this question. It's not nearly as interesting as rape and honor killings because there are a lot of loopholes in the proposition that I'm going to put out. But it seems to me especially in the United States, and I wonder if globally maybe with the exception of Africa, what we're seeing is realignment not along denominational lines, but along orthodox versus progressive lines. Evangelicals might have a much better dialogue with Orthodox Jews than they would with their mainline brethren, for example. I know Evangelicals, at least ones I've interviewed, have a great respect for Muslims, at least in

America, because they hold a lot of the same tenets, worldviews, views of God, in heaven and hell and other theological issues.

What I'm wondering is whether you're seeing this kind of realignment, the kind of two tectonic plates globally, is that coming to pass? And if so, couldn't that hurt pluralism in the sense that you just have two big sides and they're only willing to talk to each other and the edges get sharper as progressives do not want to talk to conservatives and vice versa?

**BERGER:** I think you'll find that religious conservatives from different traditions find they have much in common with each other. I'll give an example of a person I know. A German political scientist did survey-type studies in Israel and on the West Bank, and he found that Orthodox Jews and Orthodox Muslims agreed on an amazing number of issues. The only thing they sharply disagreed about was the question of real estate: who and what belongs to whom. (Laughter.) But the role of women certainly, and a number of other things.

I think this is true, but that doesn't mean the lines then therefore disappear. I don't just mean between Orthodox Jews and Muslims in the Middle East, but Evangelicals and others that you cite. They may find they agree on, say, the nature of marriage or about something like that, but there are still very sharp disagreements in terms of other things they believe in. I don't think these would therefore disappear even if they form temporary alliances on this or that political issue.

**HAGERTY:** I guess I'm less optimistic about the advance of pluralism because I see a sharpening – a hardening of positions. When you look at the Episcopal Church in America, the breakaway – the conservatives here and they're getting a lot of their power and impetus from aligning themselves with Africa and Asia. I may be wrong, but my sense is that as the two sides tend to evolve around two hardened views of progressiveness versus orthodoxy and pluralism actually becomes less possible. I'm not even thinking about denominations, I'm just thinking about whether there truly will be a schism in the Episcopal Church and whether we really will see hemispheric shifts and whether the two sides will be able to talk. I mean, I just don't see it happening personally, but –

**BERGER:** Well, some of it is happening. It's certainly happening on the unofficial level and I'm quite convinced in the United States and I think it's true in Western Europe. Most people are in the middle: They are neither fundamentalist nor relativist. As long as you have democracy and you have some freedom of expression, this middle asserts itself one way or another. Sure, there could be developments whether fundamentalism hardens and you get really sort of absolutely irreconcilable camps to the point of civil war, but I don't see that as a realistic probability in Western democracies. I may be wrong.

**JOHN DICKERSON, SLATE:** (Off mike) – Western democracy is a necessary condition for that and therefore underlines the now discredited theory that started a war that all you need was a little democracy and the sharpenings would go away.



**BERGER:** No, no, no. I think, it's Fareed Zakaria reminded us not long ago, it's liberal democracy we're talking about, not democracy in the abstract as a political mechanism.

**DICKERSON:** (Off mike) – and behind this war wasn't that we were liberal or illiberal.

**BERGER:** No, but part of the theory behind this war was that we can establish democracy anywhere in the world by force of arms, which I think was a mistake. No, no, no. I'm not endorsing that point of view, but I think liberal democracy is very helpful in providing conditions in which peaceful and useful conversation can take place. It doesn't guarantee it, but it's helpful.

**JEFFREY GOLDBERG, THE NEW YORKER:** I suppose this is a debate for another session, but I'm not sure that democracy has been discredited as an idea. My question has to do with your justifiable fear of Islamic fundamentalism. I'm wondering what you believe would be the preconditions necessary in the Muslim world that would allow for conditions in which the inerrancy or errancy of the Koran could be openly debated; for instance, something that would lead to a softening of some rather hard Islamic doctrines, or is there something in Islam that prohibits the sort of reforms that have taken place in Christianity and Judaism?

**BERGER:** Well, there are some elements at the core of the Muslim tradition which makes this more difficult. And it has to do, I think, with the understanding of the Koran. And as somebody pointed out quite correctly, it's a mistake to think of the Koran and Islam the way in which the Bible is thought of in Judaism and Christianity. It's much more like the Koran plays a role in the Muslim worldview similar to Christ in the Christian worldview. The logos existed from before the Creation, the Koran existed before the Creation and the Koran is the actual word of God – in Arabic no less. These are longstanding Muslim beliefs, which are more difficult to modify than the Jewish and Christian notion of the nature of the Bible. So there are some Muslims –

**GOLDBERG:** Traditional Judaism was handed down, written by God, handed to Moses at Sinai. I mean, it doesn't play a Christ-like role, nevertheless, Judaism did reform itself, or parts of Judaism reformed itself to deemphasize the literalness of that.

**BERGER:** Yes. Well, I'm not terribly sure of the history of this, but my understanding is that modification was done under enormous pressure from the Enlightenment and happened mainly in Europe in the 19th century – am I correct?

**GOLDBERG:** Yes.

**BERGER:** Yes, and the Jewish professors dealt with it just like Christian ones had to do, and there's no comparable thing in Islam. There are some inherent difficulties in Islam for this kind of modification.

On the other hand, I am impressed by the fact that there are many good Islamic spokespeople, scholars who say, yes, we can do that, and they go back to a Muslim tradition which says that the meaning of the Koran has to be interpreted. The meaning is not immediately clear. It has to be interpreted and an historical context has to be taken.

What conditions are necessary to allow this to happen? Well, not necessarily democracy, but at least a degree of tolerance on the part of the state. I mean, if you can get executed for blasphemy if you suggest something like this, then obviously these are not conditions conducive to a liberal Islam.

But there are very big differences in the Muslim world and one area that I find very interesting and very important is Indonesia. First of all, you have a tradition of very moderate Islam in Indonesia. I know a lot about Indonesia because the associate director of our institute is an Indonesia expert, Robert Hefner, and he has mainly written about Indonesian Islam. And the two major Islamic organizations that are the biggest in the world, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, which have millions of adherents, have a very liberal Islam.

I met three times with the guy who used to be head of Nahdlatul Ulama, Abdurrahman Wahid, and it's amazing what this man says. We interviewed him three times – well, two were interviews, one was not, one in Jakarta, one when he came to Boston. We said, “Do you think the Shariah should be the law of the state?” He said, “No. Shariah is for the guidance of believers; the state should be ruled by secular law.” Very interesting. We said, “What about the banking, usury?” He said, “Well, first of all, the Koran is not a textbook of economics. Secondly, what the prophet was speaking against was excessive interest, but normal bank interest is perfectly all right.” Then we asked him the most difficult question: “What about religious freedom?” He said, “Oh, we believe in religious freedom. Oh, we cite the same Koranic passage: no coercion in matters of religion.”

Then I asked him: “What about a Muslim who decides to become a Christian or some other religion?” He answered without a moment's hesitation: “I would deplore his doing this. I would try to dissuade him, but of course, it's his right.” Now, that's not some guy. This was the head of the major Muslim movement in Indonesia.

That is not unimportant, and while radical Islam in Indonesia has become louder and more dangerous and the government has been a little fearful in dealing with it, there are trends in the Muslim world that I think are hopeful. I say this only half tongue-in-cheek – a good condition for the development of a liberal Islam is if an illiberal Islam runs the government, and Iran would be the example of this.

**BERGER:** That's true. But if that government is gone, Iran may become the shining example of liberal Islam because the younger people would go in that direction, even in Qom, I think.

**JOHN GREEN, THE FORUM:** Peter, during your presentation, you said that you had certain moral certainties upon which you were unwilling to compromise, and I was wondering if you thought that sense of moral certainty that people in the world have places a limit on the spread of religious pluralism?

**BERGER:** No, because you can hold these moral beliefs no matter what your religion or lack of religion is. I'm quite convinced of that. I mean, take a case of torture, and the belief that torture is utterly unacceptable, in violation of basic human dignity and rights. That doesn't seem to me to hinge on any particular religious position. I don't see how that would affect pluralism. It affects moral pluralism, but not religious pluralism.

As I mentioned, it is one problem I have which I'm trying to deal with. While I'm quite convinced one can be religious without certainty, I don't see how one can avoid certainty in certain moral judgments. I can't say torture is a matter of taste, OK?

**COOPERMAN:** Neither is your moral clarity absolute on every issue.

**BERGER:** No, no, no, no, no. I'm sorry. In terms of religion, I disclaim any certainty. In terms of morality, I claim certain admittedly limited certainties. And there's one story I love to tell. I'm sorry I told it at dinner last night. It's from James Morris, who wrote this wonderful history of the British Empire before his sex change operation; since then, she has written rather boring travelogues. (Laughter.) But that's neither here nor there, not an argument against sex change operations –

In the history of the British Empire, he tells this wonderful story of General Napier, who conquered the Sindh for British India, and did there what the British did elsewhere. They didn't much interfere with local customs, but certain things they wouldn't accept and immediately made illegal. The first one that Napier made illegal was sati, burning of widows, and a delegation of Brahmin priests came to see him and said, “You cannot prohibit sati.” He said, “Yes, I can and I have.” They said, “You cannot do it because it's an ancient tradition of our people.” Napier replied, “We, British, also have ancient traditions. When men burn their women alive, we hang them. Let us all follow our traditions.” (Laughter.) I'm opposed to capital punishment, let me add, but I find this a magnificent sentiment that I would recommend on a number of moral issues.