EDITORIAL

The present and future of the religious past in the United States

O presente e o futuro do passado religioso nos Estados Unidos

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On June 27, 2017, Peter L. Berger passed away. The Austrian sociologist, who built his academic career in the United States, became a key reference in the study of religion in modernity. His contributions to secularization theory profoundly impacted the field, particularly through his most well-known work, *The Sacred Canopy* (1967). In that book, Berger defended what he considered an orthodox position in sociology at the time: the conviction that the more modernity advanced, the less space religion would occupy in the contemporary world. Over the years, however, he gradually revised this stance. In *The Desecularization of the World* (1999), Berger admitted that he had been wrong about secularization theory. Empirical evidence — such as the rise of politically engaged religious movements worldwide since the late 1970s — contradicted the idea of religion's decline in modernity.

The Many Altars of Modernity was Berger's final book, originally published in 2014. In what could be considered his "swan song," the sociologist adopted a more nuanced perspective, shaped by decades of research and

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reflection, which led him to approach strong claims about religion's present and future with caution. In that work, Berger softened his critique of secularization theory, concluding that, in the contemporary world, "many ordinary believers who succeed in being both secular and religious" (Berger, 2017, p. 15). Even highly religious individuals, he noted, "operate within a secular discourse in important areas of their lives. […] For most believers there is not a stark either/or dichotomy between faith and secularity but rather a fluid construction of both/and" (Berger, 2017, p. 12). Nevertheless, the central thesis of Berger's later work was that secularization was not the defining transformation of modernity; rather, "pluralism, the co-existence of different worldviews and value systems in the same society, is the major change brought about by modernity for the place of religion both in the minds of individuals and in the institutional order" (Berger, 2017, p. 10).

In the case of the United States, Berger viewed the country as a prime example of religious pluralism, where the dynamics and management of pluralism had achieved relative success. He argued that the values embedded in the First Amendment functioned not only as a set of legal norms but also became progressively internalized by the population, fostering a collective acceptance of religious diversity. However, while the United States may indeed be evolving from a predominantly Protestant nation to an increasingly religiously plural one, it is essential to acknowledge that this process has not been without significant resistance and, in some cases, social tensions.

Since the colonial period, the United States has exhibited a considerably higher degree of religious diversity than many other Western nations. In contrast to a Europe still deeply influenced by the principle of *Une foi, une loi, un roi*, the experience of the thirteen colonies was marked by a broad spectrum of Christian expressions, as well as interactions with the religions of Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans. In popular discourse, the image of early American settlers is often reduced to that of the Puritans (predominantly Congregationalists) of New England. This narrative tends to overshadow other significant religious presences, such as Maryland's strong Catholic community, the arrival of Dutch Jews in New Amsterdam in New York, and the relatively greater religious

tolerance in colonies like Rhode Island and Pennsylvania. Additionally, it frequently neglects the religious diversity among Indigenous peoples. Scholars such as Jon Butler (1990) have criticized the disproportionate emphasis on Puritanism in American religious history, arguing that this focus overlooks the complexity, diversity, and regional specificities that truly characterized the thirteen colonies.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the British colonies in North America were seen as a place of hope for various groups of European religious dissenters. Throughout this period, several sectarian groups that had emerged from Britain's religious awakenings of the 17th century crossed the Atlantic. Among them, the Quakers were the most prominent, followed by Calvinists from the Palatinate region of Germany, Calvinists from the Dutch Reformed Church, and numerous Baptists — initially English, but later also Swedish, Latvian, and others. Irish and Scottish Presbyterians, Anabaptist communities (primarily Mennonites), Moravian Pietists, and various Lutheran groups also settled in the colonies.

However, for non-European and non-Protestant groups, life in North America was far from an oasis of religious freedom. For enslaved Africans, this period was marked by what Jon Butler described as an *African spiritual holocaust* — a systematic effort, often supported by white church leaders, to erase all traces of African religious traditions among the enslaved population. Indigenous peoples, on the other hand, navigated complex relationships between their spiritual traditions and Christianity. In *Native Americans, Christianity, and the Reshaping of the American Religious Landscape* (2010), Joel W. Martin and Mark A. Nicholas explore the diverse religious interactions among Indigenous communities, including Christian, non-Christian, and even former Christian groups, revealing the ways in which Indigenous peoples negotiated encounters with missionaries and Christianity itself.

When studying religion in 17th- and 18th-century America, it is essential to adopt an Atlantic perspective rather than viewing it in isolation from the European religious context. This approach helps explain how certain patterns of European Christianity were reproduced in the American colonies. These patterns included conflicts between established churches and dissenting groups, the

persistence of magical and occult practices in popular religiosity, and, most notably, the spread of revivalist movements. Beginning in the early 18th century, "both sides of the Atlantic witnessed an outburst of popular religious enthusiasm in which itinerant preachers traveled from place to place, testifying about their own religious experiences and encouraging working people wherever they went to become [...] 'instruments of their own salvation'" (Linebaugh; Rediker, 2008, p. 204). Revivalist preachers such as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards had a profound impact, emphasizing God's impending wrath against the unrepentant and the necessity of personal, genuine conversion for salvation. Furthermore, many scholars have observed that the revivals contributed to an emerging sense of nationalism and the belief in American exceptionalism. Jonathan Edwards, for instance, expressed a postmillennialist hope that the advent of God's kingdom on Earth would begin in a "revived America": "and withal consider what the State of Things now is [...], we can't reasonably think otherwise, than that the Beginning of this great Work of God [the establishment of the Millennium] must be near. And there are many Things that make it probable that this Work will begin in America".[1]

The century of religious revivals was also the century that witnessed the revolutionary process culminating in the United States' independence. Despite the strong influence of religious rhetoric during this period, an early process of secularization began to emerge in certain areas of life within the former English colonies. Sectors such as commerce, warfare, and, to some extent, politics increasingly operated independently of religious influence. Moreover, the intellectual framework of most of the *Founding Fathers* was shaped more by Enlightenment thought than by Christianity. While they acknowledged the Protestant legacy's role in shaping ideas of freedom — especially freedom of thought — they also recognized that Protestantism was not synonymous with liberty. The young nation had already experienced official state churches in some colonies, where access to public office was restricted to communicant members, and religious dissenters were denied religious freedom — sometimes even facing

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[1] This passage is found in Edwards's text *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England, and the Way in Which It Ought to Be Acknowledged and Promoted, Humbly Offered to the Public, in a Treatise on That Subject* (1742). The full content of the text can be found at:<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N04004.0001.001?view=toc>. Accessed on November 11, 2024.

capital punishment for blasphemy or heresy. In the Declaration of Independence, religious elements appear in references to the "laws of nature and of Nature's God", the "Supreme Judge of the world", and appeals to Divine Providence for protection. However, the document is fundamentally more secular than religious, even implicitly. The First Amendment of 1791 reaffirmed principles regarding religion's role in society that had already been outlined in the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* (1786), drafted by Thomas Jefferson. This statute prohibited the establishment of a state religion while guaranteeing freedom of worship. It did not entail a rejection or hostility toward religion but rather, as J.G.A. Pocock (2003, p. 416) argues in his analysis of the Virginia Statute, represented "the political indifference to religious beliefs".

Although the United States was founded on legal principles that did not require theological justification, its subsequent religious history is one of Christianity's rise rather than its decline. Scholars highlight an ongoing process of the "Christianization of the American people" (Butler) and the "democratization of Christianity" (Hatch), but also note that this Christianity was "so complex and heterogeneous that it challenges both observers and its own adherents" (BUTLER, 1990, p. 2). Moreover, despite the exalted principle of religious freedom enshrined in law, in practice, "some states recognized Christianity as the official — though not established — religion. Jurors were required to believe in God, teachers had to read the Bible, and in some states, religious observance of the 'Lord's Day' was legally mandated" (Commager, 1969, p. 174). Throughout the 19th century, the United States remained deeply influenced by revival movements and the strength of various Protestant denominations, which played a crucial unifying role in society. By the second half of the century, a widespread perception had taken hold: the belief that the United States was "a Protestant Christian nation uniquely favored by God, and that reception of His continued blessings depended on maintaining that Protestant identity" (Cohen; Numbers, 2013, p. 4).

The 19th century was also a period of significant religious diversification and growing pluralism. Within Christianity, certain denominations — such as the Baptists and Methodists — experienced substantial growth, while internal

schisms led to the emergence of new traditions. This era also saw the establishment of the first African American Christian churches, marking a major development in the nation's religious landscape. At the same time, religious and spiritual fervor extended beyond Protestantism, fueling increased interest in spiritualism, esotericism, and occultism. New religious movements emerged, including the Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

At the turn of the 20th century, a new factor intensified these religious transformations: massive waves of immigration into America's major cities. Metropolises like New York and Chicago were rapidly exposed to an unprecedented level of religious and cultural diversity. While Protestantism remained a dominant force, the sheer number of non-Protestant immigrants made it increasingly difficult to maintain the notion of the United States as a "Protestant nation". Many Protestants saw Catholic immigrants —especially Italians and Irish — as a particular threat. To illustrate this demographic shift, Marsden (1991, p. 14) notes that while the number of members in major Protestant denominations grew from approximately 5 million to 16 million between 1860 and 1900, the number of Catholics quadrupled due to immigration, rising from 3 million to 12 million. American cities, therefore, became filled with people who did not speak English, were unfamiliar with reading the Bible, did not observe the Sabbath, and in many cases engaged in practices seen as morally suspect — such as excessive drinking, dancing, and nightlife. As a result, the identification of values such as democracy, freedom, and equality with Protestantism was shaken. These ideals could no longer be sustained in a society dominated by white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants but had to be redefined within an increasingly pluralistic context. This shift provoked backlash. In the "land of liberty," anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, and anti-immigrant rhetoric became increasingly common. Many viewed immigrants as a threat to civilization and the legacy of the "Pilgrim Fathers".

The 20th century brought further religious transformations in the United States, including the rise of Pentecostal churches, internal conflicts within Protestant denominations between liberal and fundamentalist factions, and the emergence of mass-media preachers who attracted large audiences. Figures like

Billy Graham expanded their influence beyond live events through radio and, later, television. However, despite these changes, Christianity remained overwhelmingly dominant, and religious diversity beyond Christian traditions remained limited. Cohen and Numbers (2013, p. 8) identify 1965 as a turning point in America's religious pluralism. That year, under President Lyndon Johnson, new immigration laws took effect, allowing for a significant influx of immigrants from across the world — not just from Europe. Between 1966 and 2000, 22.8 million legal immigrants arrived in the United States. These new migration patterns introduced a rich array of religious traditions, solidifying the presence of Eastern religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Christianity itself was also transformed by these migrations, as millions of evangelicals and Catholics from the Global South arrived, fueling what scholars have termed the "de-Europeanization of American Christianity" (Cohen; Numbers, 2013, p. 8).

Having provided this brief overview of the religious landscape in the United States, we now return to Peter Berger and the contemporary context of religion in the country, particularly its relationship with American society. The issues surrounding a religiously pluralistic society are directly tied to the defense of values and policies that either unite or divide the nation. On one hand, the United States is seen as a land of religious diversity and freedom, where a wide range of religious expressions coexist peacefully — a freedom that is considered an essential component of national identity. On the other hand, a significant portion of American society continues to uphold the ideal of the United States as a "Christian nation", founded on values rooted in its white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon heritage.

This tension plays out in a context of increasing religious diversity and the growing presence of openly non-religious sectors of the population — the so-called *nones*, which include atheists, agnostics, and individuals unaffiliated with any religious community. In this regard, we align with Yang's (2017) observation regarding Berger's notion of pluralism. In *The Many Altars of Modernity*, Berger defines pluralism as "a social situation in which people with different ethnicities, worldviews, and moralities live together peacefully and interact with each other

amicably" (Berger, 2017, p. 20). Berger's concept of pluralism has a normative character — an idealized vision of harmonious coexistence among different religious traditions within a shared social space. However, throughout his work, Berger sometimes appears to conflate pluralism with *plurality*, the latter referring to the empirically observable existence of diverse religious traditions within a given territory.

Berger emphasized the need to "define formulas for a peaceful co-existence of different religious traditions and institutions within a society" (2017, p. 158). This remains a challenge for the American public sphere. While religious plurality has been a consistent feature of U.S. history, the institutionalization of pluralism as a positively valued principle — and Berger's hope for an internalized religious tolerance — remains a distant reality. The contemporary context, marked by *culture wars*, the proliferation of intolerant discourse against minority groups and immigrants, and the political rhetoric promising to make "Christian America" "great again," presents significant obstacles to achieving this ideal.

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