

The Spiritual Turn and the Disenchantment of the World

Max Weber, Peter Berger and the Religion-Science Conflict

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ABSTRACT

There is little question that organized religion as embodied in the Christian churches has not fared well in recent decades. Yet, precisely the period when the decline of organized religion hit its stride – the 1960s and 1970s – also witnessed the rise of what Ernst Troeltsch referred to as “mystic religion,” only now it goes by “spirituality.” Indeed, recent empirical studies suggest that, in addition to secularization, we are also witnessing a veritable *spiritual turn*. How do we explain this? We pursue this puzzle in a somewhat peculiar fashion: by turning the sociological gaze toward the lives and oeuvres of the two sociologists who have arguably played the most outsized roles in the development of classical secularization theory: Max Weber and Peter Berger. Addressing their theoretical contributions in tandem with their personal stances vis-à-vis religion, we argue that the standard account of secularization rests on an extremely one-sided interpretation of their legacy: it leaves out their steadfast romanticism, their deep commitments to the value of individual freedom, and, most importantly, the particular religious paths they charted. Furthermore, we contend that each of them exemplifies a way of reconciling a rationalist commitment to disenchanting science with a romantic longing for ultimate meaning, which sheds significant light on why mystical religion (or “spirituality”) has come to flourish in late modernity.

Keywords:

Disenchantment, Max Weber, Mysticism, Peter Berger, Spirituality

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The salvation sought by the intellectual is always based on inner need. (Max Weber, 1991: p. 124)

Not everyone, blessedly, can become a full-fledged sociologist. The one who does, if our argument is accepted, will have to pay the price of disenchantment and find his way in a world that lives on myth. (Peter Berger 1963: p. 173)

1. Introduction

There is little question that organized religion as embodied in the Christian churches has not fared well in recent decades. It is widely acknowledged among sociologists of religion that, aside from a few pockets of revival, the churches in the West are bleeding members left, right, and center (Houtman and Mascini, 2002; Voas and Crockett, 2005; Bruce, 2011; Clarke and McDonald, 2017). Yet, precisely the period when the decline of organized religion hit its stride – the 1960s and 1970s – also witnessed the rise of a “new religious consciousness,” characterized by what Robert Bellah referred to as “an intense preoccupation with authentic personal experience” (Bellah, 1970: p. 224). Moreover, Bellah was not alone in suggesting that what superficially looked like secularization at the time—a marked hostility to the churches, especially towards ecclesiasticism and dogmatism—portended a powerful turn towards what Ernst Troeltsch once referred to as “mystic” or “spiritual” religion (e.g., Campbell, 1978; Robertson, 1975; Stone, 1978; Wuthnow, 1976).

In *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, Troeltsch contends that Christianity has sprouted three distinct religious forms: the church, sect, and mystical types. For Troeltsch, the Catholic church of the Middle Ages comes closest to embodying the church ideal-type, while the sect type became dominant in the wake of the Reformation. However, increasingly dominant in modernity, argues Troeltsch, is a third, mystical, type—which has, unfortunately, been long overlooked by sociologists of religion (Campbell, 1978;

Garrett, 1975). Importantly, Troeltsch distinguishes between mysticism in a narrow technical sense – the remit of philosophers of religion – and mysticism in a broad sense, which he argues expresses itself in “immense variety” (Troeltsch, 1992: p. 734). Of the latter, Troeltsch (1992: pp. 730-731) writes,

In the widest sense of the word, mysticism is simply the insistence upon a direct inward and present religious experience. It takes for granted the objective forms of religious life in worship, ritual, myth, and dogma; and it is either a reaction against these objective practices, which it tries to draw back into the living process, or it is the supplementing of traditional forms of worship by means of a personal and living stimulus.

Moreover, because mysticism places “intense emphasis upon ‘first-hand experience’” it “can be combined with every kind of objective religion, and with customary forms of worship, myth, and doctrine.” Yet, because it tends to “see itself as the real universal heart of all religion, of which the various myth-forms are merely the outer garment,” mysticism, argues Troeltsch, has historically tended to be hostile to the established church (1992: p. 734).

In line with Bellah’s predictions, recent empirical studies have made evident that Troeltsch’s “mystic” religion has become increasingly prominent in the West – only today it goes by “spirituality” (Hanegraaff, 1996; Roof, 1999; Fuller, 2001; Porterfield, 2001; Houtman and Aupers, 2007; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Campbell, 2007; Bender, 2010; Schmidt, 2012; Watts, 2018a; Tromp, Pless and Houtman, 2020). For what many call “spirituality” roots the essence of religion in direct personal experience of the divine (Taylor, 2002). And in most cases, as Wade Clark Roof (1999: p. 6) observes, among those who call themselves “spiritual but not religious” there exists an abiding commitment to religious individualism, which prizes individual freedom, personal authenticity and transcendent experience – what we might call a “religion of the heart” (Watts, 2022). In short, despite evident secularization, we also seem to be in the midst of a veritable *spiritual turn*.

Accordingly, since the 1960s the West has not so much witnessed the death of religion *per se*, as the simultaneous decline of church Christianity and flourishing of Troeltschian mysticism (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Houtman and Mascini, 2002; Campbell, 2007; Watts, 2018b). Now, the occurrence of this dual process does not, in our view, contradict secularization theory because the rise of “spirituality” has not compensated for the massive decline in church Christianity (Houtman and Mascini, 2002; Bruce, 2017;

Voas and Crockett, 2005; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2021). However, the crucial research question is why these two processes have occurred in tandem in the first place.

In this article we pursue this puzzle in a somewhat peculiar fashion: we turn our gaze toward the lives and oeuvres of the two sociologists who have arguably played the most outsized roles in the development of classical secularization theory: Max Weber and Peter Berger. Our reasoning for this methodological approach is as follows: the standard account of secularization—which assumes a zero-sum relationship between modern science and religion—offers an extremely one-sided interpretation of the Weberian-Bergerian theoretical legacy. It leaves out their steadfast romanticism, their deep commitments to the value of individual freedom, and, most importantly, the particular religious paths they charted. Accordingly, we analyze Weber and Berger, respectively, in light of their own sociological theories, in order to make sense of their religious trajectories. In so doing, we treat them as representative of a certain way of reconciling a rationalist commitment to disenchanting science with a romantic longing for ultimate meaning, the close examination of which sheds significant light on why mystical religion (or “spirituality”) has flourished in modernity.

2. Secularization: The Standard Account

Sociology’s standard account of secularization presupposes a zero-sum relation between religion and science: the more of one, the less of the other. Indeed, a strained relationship between the two is implicit in much classical secularization theory. While founding fathers of sociology like Comte, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber may have disagreed about the precise nature of modernity, not to mention its merits, their intellectual debts to the Enlightenment ensured a shared set of assumptions. For these men, modernity marks a rupture in time, an epochal shift, which crucially entails the steady demise of religion and concomitant rise of science. As Robert Bellah (1970: p. 28) summarizes, “By the late nineteenth century it seemed obvious to many that religion was on its way out and was soon to be replaced entirely by science.” This general view was, of course, shared not only by the early sociologists; it was implicit in the theories of Darwin and Freud, among others. But one could reasonably argue that it was sociology which posed the most dangerous threat to the religious realm. Indeed, Bellah himself thought as much (1970: pp. 238-39).

More than any other classical sociologist, secularization theory remains comprehensively indebted to Max Weber. In his celebrated lecture, “Science as a Vocation,”

given in 1917 in Munich to faculty and students in the sciences, Weber proclaimed, “That science today is irreligious no one will doubt in his innermost being, even if he will not admit it to himself” (Weber, 1946: p. 143). According to Weber, the rising authority of the empirical sciences is a feature of “intellectualization,” whereby owing to scientific discovery and technological innovation, the world progressively comes under human control, and is therefore increasingly understood in mechanistic terms. This process of intellectualization – one aspect of a larger process of rationalization in modernity – has its ironic origins, Weber contends, in Ancient Judaism, and subsequently, the Protestant Reformation. With the Hebrew Prophets, polytheism is rejected and God becomes radically transcendent, no longer present in the world. Protestantism (especially Puritanism) takes this further with its principle of *sola gratia*, thereby setting the stage for the natural world to be investigated and understood without any appeal to the supernatural or transcendent (Weber, 2003: p. 105). Of course, Weber recognized that most moderns have little actual scientific knowledge (Weber, 1946: p. 139): what distinguishes modernity is not that individuals have more knowledge about the causal workings of the world, but that they believe that they could, theoretically, “learn it any time” (1946: p. 140). What this means, Weber famously professes, is that “the world is disenchanted” (1946: p. 140).

Classical secularization theory takes this Weberian account to imply that religion is fated to die out (see Berger, 1967). It holds that intellectualization undermines the plausibility of religious worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*), bringing about a wholly mechanistic world that is ostensibly deaf to human suffering, empty of value, and basically meaningless. Yet, an account of secularization based on these insights neglects the nuance and complexity of Weber’s corpus. That is, it is dubiously one-sided in its neglect of Weber’s philosophy of science, along with his forceful critique of scientific pretensions of being able to explain what things “really” mean after religion has lost its sway. For with such pretensions, Weber holds, science betrays its disenchanting mission: it does not stick to logical and empirical analysis of how the world *is*, but instead indulges in musings about what things “truly” or “objectively” mean – whether they are important or trivial, good or bad. Such science, Weber protests, does not disenchant the world, but imbues it with meaning and thus re-enchants rather than disenchants, betraying the scientific ideal in the process. Indeed, as we will explain below, Weber’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, which is pivotal for his theory of disenchantment, contains a powerful critique of the notion that science can, much like religion before it, imbue the world with meaning.

3. Max Weber: Sociology's Great Disenchanter

Weber once famously communicated to Ferdinand Tönnies that he was “absolutely ‘unmusical’ in religious matters” (Radkau, 2009: p. 523). Moreover, he repeatedly chastised those who worshipped the “idols” of “‘personality’ and ‘personal experience’” as well as failed to “measure up to workaday existence” (Weber, 1946: pp. 146, 149). And in his public address, “Science as a Vocation,” Weber counsels the young scientists in the audience: “To the person who cannot bear the fate of the times like a man, one must say: may he rather return silently, without the usual publicity build-up of renegades, but simply and plainly. The arms of the old churches are opened widely and compassionately for him” (1946: p. 155). It is this kind of condescending provocation that leads Charles Taylor (2007: p. 550) to interpret Weber as a champion of the Enlightenment ideal of “disengaged reason,” for whom intellectual maturity demands stoic resignation before a cold meaningless universe. Yet, while clearly not mistaken, this is only one side of the story.

3.1. Disenchanting and Enchanting Science: The Role of Values in Science

A more sophisticated interpretation of Weber's analysis of disenchantment recognizes that it poses more of a threat to magic than to religion. This is because while magic aims at solving practical everyday problems (which in modernity are increasingly addressed by science-derived technology), religion provides ethical values and fulfills the need for ultimate meaning by prescribing routes to salvation. As Weber (1946: p. 352) puts it: “Religion claims to offer an ultimate stance toward the world by virtue of a direct grasp of the world's ‘meaning’ It claims to unlock the meaning of the world not by means of the intellect but by virtue of a charisma of illumination.”

Of course, it remains true that, to the extent that a religious worldview depends upon empirically falsifiable claims about history or the natural world, modern science is likely to challenge it. Yet, the mere fact that religion loses its rational justification does not necessarily lead to its wholesale demise. Indeed, Weber is adamant that science literally cannot replace religion, for “the tension between the value-spheres of ‘science’ and the sphere of the ‘holy’ is unbridgeable” (1946: p. 154). This statement becomes clearer in light of Weber's philosophy of science. Adopting a neo-Kantian distinction between facts and values, Weber

holds that, given its rationalist-cum-empiricist foundations, science (be it natural or social) is incapable of distinguishing between good and bad, or meaningfulness and meaninglessness, and thus incapable of guiding ethical action. Echoing Tolstoy, Weber writes: “Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: ‘What shall we do and how shall we live?’ That science does not give an answer is irrefutable” (1946: p. 143). Needless to say, this is why so many have presumed that Weber’s conception of modernity is fundamentally pessimistic: we are left alone in a meaningless world (Seidman 1983). But the truth is more complicated than this – a fact that becomes clear when we examine Weber’s doctrine of “value neutrality” (*Wertungsfreiheit*).

As Alvin Gouldner (1962) pointed out some time ago, the ideal of “value neutrality” has been deeply misinterpreted by countless sociologists. Many a positivist has claimed Weber as their forerunner, failing to realize that his analysis was actually antithetical to the positivist spirit. Rather than making a case for positivism, Weber sought to unmask the positivist pretension of being able to represent reality “objectively” (free of values) as both theoretically confused and unethical, since it hides normative values under the guise of scientific research. Put another way: Weber’s account of “value neutrality” was ultimately a plea for a social science that disenchants the world and against one that re-enchants the world by endowing it with an allegedly “objective” or “true” meaning (Houtman, 2021).

Disenchanting social science, as defended by Weber, recognizes its rootedness in scientifically-arbitrary values that define what is “worth studying” and what is not, thus acknowledging its inevitable one-sidedness or “value relatedness” (*Wertbeziehung*). It does as such limit itself to a strictly empirical analysis of a state of affairs without pretending to be capable of scientifically demonstrating its “objective” meaning (e.g., whether it is important or not, good or bad, etc.). Enchanting social science, on the other hand, claims precisely this—that applying the scientific method can uncover “objective” or “true” meaning.¹ For Weber this type of social science fundamentally misunderstands the epistemological and moral limits of the empirical sciences: it “re-enchants the world by pretensions of being capable of endowing [...] phenomena with scientifically informed ‘objective’ and ‘true’ meaning,” as Houtman (2021: p. 42) puts it. Indeed, Weber offers strong words for those who claim to have discovered the “objective” meaning of the world via empirical observation, calling them “big children” (1946: p. 142).

3.2. Weber's Strategy of Segregation

Following Alvin Gouldner (1962), we believe Weber's endorsement of "value neutrality" is best conceived as an attempt to limit the scope of intellectualization and disenchantment to their rightful place in modernity, while safeguarding the pre-eminence of moral values and the personal freedom to choose between them. Many Weberian scholars have pointed out that "the autonomous individual was one of Weber's deepest convictions" (Honigsheim, 2000: p. 206). While Steven Seidman and David Gruber (1977: p. 498) go so far as to suggest that Weber's comparative investigations of modern capitalism and culture were intended "to illuminate those structural tendencies of modernity which served to preserve or destroy individual autonomy." Thus, crucial to note here is Weber's Nietzschean-inspired liberalism (see Beetham, 1994). He agreed with Nietzsche that "God is dead," or that modernity is a "godless and prophetless time" (Weber, 1946: p. 153). But he was simultaneously committed to a basically liberal-romanticist conception of individuality – hence why many have conceived of him as a proto-existentialist (Palonen, 1999). As Gouldner (1962: p. 211) explains, "To Weber as a man, only those values are authentic which stem from conscious decision, from a consultation of the inner conscience and a willful commitment to its dictates." So, in advocating "value neutrality" in sociology Weber did not seek to prioritize disenchanting social science over religion, but rather the opposite: "It [science] can assist him [the scholar] in becoming aware of the ultimate standards of value which he does not make explicit to himself or, which he must presuppose in order to be logical" (Weber, 1949: p. 54).

It follows that Weber endorsed disenchanting social science, not because he was a hardnosed positivist or full-blown atheist, but rather because he conceived of the private sphere – the individual conscience – as the appropriate and legitimate site of modern (re)enchantment (Kontos, 1994: p. 237). Science, while instrumentally useful as a means to achieving technical mastery or "self-clarification," cannot inform ethical positions, so all of us must decide for ourselves which "gods" to worship: "We cannot evade it so long as we remain true to ourselves" (Weber, 1946: p. 152).

But how exactly is this supposed to work? Weber endorsed a "strategy of segregation" whereby "charismatic irrationality" would be excluded from certain modern institutions, such as the university, while "admitting it into and, indeed, exalting its manifestations in the inward personal life of individuals" (Gouldner, 1962: p. 211). Thus, in one sense, Weber's reputation as an heir to the secular rationalist Enlightenment is accurate: in championing a disenchanting social science, Weber sought to "safeguard the integrity and freedom ... of the

university, as the embodiment of a larger Western tradition of rationalism” (Gouldner, 1962: p. 202). Indeed, this is why he fiercely opposed the professorial “cult of personality” which he saw forming around certain professors in the German academy. He saw this as fundamentally at odds with the dispassionate, even ascetic, scientific ideal he believed should reign within the modern university: “the prophet and the demagogue do not belong on the academic platform” (Weber, 1946: p. 146).² However, this is only one side of the story, since outside of the university, and especially in his personal life, Weber did not feel obliged to be “value free” (Radkau, 2009: p. 490). And this is because he was acutely aware of the fact that his personal commitment to disenchanting social science was *itself* grounded in metaphysical values. This is why he spoke of science as a “vocation”—he felt that it was his “calling” and that “to judge the validity of such [scientific] values is a matter of faith” (Weber, 1949: p. 55).

Weber was not simply pessimistic, but deeply ambivalent about modernity. On the one hand, he admired the power and efficiency of bureaucracy and capitalist industry, and, as we have seen, he was committed to the ideal of disenchanting social science. On the other hand, he feared that, as processes of intellectualization and rationalization made inroads across social spheres, the space for individuality, meaningfulness and ethical value were drastically shrinking—hence his famous metaphor for modernity as an “iron cage,” or more accurately, a “steel shell” (see Baehr, 2011). This sparked an intensely personal struggle to reconcile his commitment to scientific integrity with a romantic-inspired desire to salvage personal authenticity and individual freedom in an increasingly rationalized world. As a sociologist, Weber was firmly convinced that honest scholarship requires a commitment to disenchanting social science, but as a man for whom individual freedom was a sacred value, he sought escape from the threat of meaninglessness and axiological nihilism wrought by modernity.

3.3. Weber on Mystical Enchantment in a Disenchanted World

Where does mysticism enter the picture? Of course, Weber (1964: p. 55) made clear that, in light of modern disenchantment, he considered it a sign of intellectual weakness to “return silently” to the church. However, we agree with his biographer Joachim Radkau (2009: p. 531) that Weber was no hardnosed, anti-religious atheist. For despite the paucity of public

statements about his personal religiosity, private ones suggest a sympathy for mysticism of the Troeltschian type.

In 1913 and 1914, only a few years before he gave his lecture on “Science as a Vocation,” Weber was taking personal trips to Monte Verità (Lake Maggiore) in Switzerland, a kind of proto-hippie commune, where esotericism of various sorts was flourishing (Radkau, 2009: p. 380). And when Weber intimated to Ferdinand Tönnies that he was “absolutely ‘unmusical’ in religious matters”, he made sure to immediately qualify this statement, adding: “But, on closer examination, I am neither anti-religious nor irreligious” (cited in Radkau, 2009: p. 532). Indeed, Radkau (2009: p. 536) reports that in the last period of his life, Weber was overheard having the following exchange with his fellow sociologist and wife, Marianne:

Max: Tell me, can you imagine being a mystic?

Marianne: That’s certainly the last thing I could imagine myself. Can you imagine it of yourself, then?

Max: It could be that I already am one. As I’ve ‘dreamed’ more in my life than one ought to allow oneself, I’m not completely reliably at home anywhere. It’s as if I could (and would) just as well withdraw entirely from everything.

In light of these revelations, Jason Josephson-Storm (2017: p. 293) argues that Weber came to the conclusion that mysticism might be “one of the remaining possibilities for religion in the face of the disenchantment of modernity.” That is, confronted with increased intellectualization and rationalization, Josephson-Storm suggests that Weber imagined “a way out of this impasse via a kind of mystical experience that allows for a retrieval of values outside the frame of the purely rational” (2017: p. 297). Alkis Kontos (1994: p. 240) similarly contends, “Weber suggestively indicates that the process of disenchantment yields to a re-enchanting recovery of the self, a radical recovery of our essential spirituality, but in the context of a disenchanted, rationalized world.” And, in line with these thinkers, Paul Honigsheim (2000: p. 216) remarks that, while Weber may have thought little of organized religion, his rejection of church dogma meant “everything but a rejection of religion and God.”

There is quite some evidence in Weber’s academic writings on religion to sustain these interpretations, short of the conclusion that Weber was a mystic himself. For one thing,

there is the significant influence of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* on Weber's religious thought (Daiber, 2002). In this book James (1990: p. 34) famously distinguishes between the "institutional" and "personal" sides of religion, and then argues that it is the latter which is primary. In fact, James (1990: p. 35) sees all religious ecclesiasticism and theology as having their origins in the mystical experiences of specific individuals, which over time become formalized. Wilhelm Hennis (1998: p. 99) contends, "In William James ... Weber could find confirmation of his profound conviction that the human significance of mysticism could not be overestimated." Indeed, Weber adopts this Jamesian framework in his sociology of religion, seeing all religion as having its roots in the mystical visions of particular charismatic prophets (see Weber, 1991). Another clue is the almost reverent quality of Weber's writings on mysticism: "Is not the assuredness of Weber's distinction between genuine and non-genuine mysticism, ecstatic and orgiastic religiosity, the best indication that he must have had religious experiences himself – or anyway a feeling of having them – and that he thought he found them again as primal human experiences in other periods and cultures?" (Radkau, 2009: p. 111). Randall Collins (2007: 37) similarly observes that Weber's writing style "brightens up" when he discusses inner-worldly mysticism, and Radkau contends that Weber had such harsh words for those who worshipped the idols of "personal experience" not because he rejected mysticism as a viable religious option *per se*, but rather because he was offended by what he perceived as its inauthentic or corrupt forms (2009: p. 536; see also Honigsheim, 2000: p. 236).

Still, even though "Weber had a highly personal relationship with his divinity" and "had this characteristic in common with mystics who also sought a direct relationship with God," as Radkau (2009: p. 535) observes, we are hesitant to conclude that Weber was a mystic. Yet, given his own analyses of mysticism, in conjunction with his private assertions, we can safely conclude that he felt a marked sympathy for it. In order to further explore this sympathy, we now turn to the sociological oeuvre and personal life of Peter Berger, who has done more than virtually any other sociologist to carry forward and refine Weber's ideas about the complicated relationship between religion and science in modernity.

4. Peter Berger: Heretical Sociologist

Unlike Weber, Berger was a theologian by training who never denied his religious "musicality" and continued to think of himself as "incurably Lutheran" throughout his life

(Berger, 2012a: p. 46). While he espoused neo-orthodoxy early in his life, he soon became a vocal spokesperson for the Protestant theological liberalism of Friedrich Schleiermacher, characterized by its centrality of “the category of religious experience” (Berger, 1979: p. 136). Why did he make this religious shift? And what exactly did it entail? We believe the development of his sociological thought provides the answers.

4.1. Berger's Weber-Inspired Secularization Theory

Berger is probably best known among sociologists for his now-classic collaboration with Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Among sociologists of religion, however, Berger is generally best known for his book *The Sacred Canopy*, in which he adapts Weber's disenchantment thesis in order to codify what has since become the classical account of secularization.

Berger follows Weber in tracing the seeds of disenchantment to the Protestant Reformation. Protestantism, he maintains, considerably sped up the process of intellectual rationalization by denying the reality of “sacred beings and forces” (Berger, 1967: p. 111). However, Berger treats Weber's disenchantment thesis as tantamount to a theory of secularization, contending that as modern science gains authority the natural world becomes ever more rationally comprehensible and manageable, thereby producing a “crisis of religion” (1967: p. 156). Berger then adds a further dimension to his Weber-inspired secularization theory: pluralism. Religion before modernity, Berger contends, was characterized by uncontested or strong plausibility structures – the social order was structured in such a way that the religious worldview of the society was reinforced at every turn; one could not help but believe. Modernity, by contrast, is characterized by a plurality of plausibility structures, where religions are forced to compete with one another – creating a situation that seriously weakens the authority of religious worldviews. Berger somberly concludes that disenchantment and pluralism have conspired to radically undermine the possibilities for religious affirmation in modernity: “Probably for the first time in history, the religious legitimations of the world have lost their plausibility not only for a few intellectuals and other marginal individuals but for broad masses of entire societies” (Berger, 1967: p. 124).

The Sacred Canopy quickly became an authoritative statement of the standard account of secularization (Dobbelaere, 2011) that influenced subsequent interpretations of Weber's disenchantment thesis, reinforcing what we have called a one-sided interpretation. In doing

so, Berger popularized the notion that science and religion are incompatible. For instance, he writes elsewhere that, “sociology is simply the most recent in a series of scientific disciplines that have profoundly challenged theology” (Berger, 1969: p. 37). He points out that “the theologian *will* have to worry whenever his position includes propositions that are subject to empirical disconfirmation” (Berger, 1967: p. 181) and that a “value free” sociologist with integrity could not justifiably espouse a form of religion that is contradicted by sociological examination (Martin, 2001: p. 157). Berger even goes so far as to call sociology “the dismal science par excellence of our time, an intrinsically debunking discipline that should be most congenial to nihilists, cynics, and other fit subjects for police surveillance” (1969: p. 48).

Yet, Berger himself was as committed to disenchanting social science as Weber was; he was equally convinced that, as a social scientist, one ought to remain “value free” (see Berger and Kellner, 1981: p. 12). Indeed, it is on this basis that he advocated “methodological atheism,” that is, bracketing out all supernatural claims when conducting empirical research (Berger, 1967: p. 180). Like Weber, Berger felt it incumbent upon the sociologist, *qua* sociologist, to accept whatever conclusions the empirical data confirmed – regardless of whether or not they liked them (Berger, 2012b: p. 313). He moreover pointed out that to the extent that the sociological perspective becomes diffuse in society “the most sacrosanct elements of religious tradition” come “to be seen as human products” (Berger, 1969: p. 39). Accordingly, Berger maintained that sociology “raises the vertigo of relativity to its most furious pitch, posing a challenge to theological thought with unprecedented sharpness” (1969: pp. 39-40). Indeed, this is why he saw sociology as a carrier of “the secular worldview” (Berger, 1979: p. 54).

Yet, whereas Weber’s commitment to disenchanted social science fueled his sympathy for mystical religion rather than leading him into an anti-religious position, Berger remained theologically engaged and stuck to his Lutheran faith, even while being a vocal critic of the mainstream churches (Dorrien, 2001). Remarkably, then, although Berger’s secularization theory assumes an insurmountable conflict between social science and religion, his personal religious trajectory demonstrates something rather different. Indeed, he warned that “it would be foolish to maintain that all theological positions are equally immune to injury from the side of sociology” (1967: 181) and that sociology – or any science, for that matter – could undermine all forms of religious faith equally (Berger and Kellner, 1981: pp. 84-85).

4.2. Berger's Strategy of Segregation

Berger stuck to his faith because, much like Weber, he refused to see his vocation as a sociologist as exhausting his self-understanding: “As a scientist, the sociologist tries to be objective, to control his personal preferences and prejudices, to perceive clearly rather than to judge normatively. This restraint does, of course, not embrace the totality of the sociologist’s existence as a human being, but is limited to his operations qua sociologist” (Berger, 1963: pp. 16-17). So, for Berger, when conducting sociological research, no matter the subject, one must always strive to achieve the disenchanting Weberian ideal. However, in one’s private life, one need not abide by the same ethic. In fact, one *should* not. For, as Berger would later put it, “what is proper in science is not proper in life” (Berger and Kellner, 1981: p. 133). Much like in Weber’s case, then, Berger combines the notion that modern science produces a “crisis of religion” with a sympathetic personal stance vis-à-vis religion. Again, as in Weber, this stems from a commitment to intellectual rationalism and a longing for ultimate meaning.

Indeed, the parallels with Weber are striking. On the one hand, Berger echoes Weber’s account of disenchantment-induced meaninglessness; he contends that the dissemination of science erodes rather than sustains “objective” meaning. Moreover, Berger remarks in *Modernity, Pluralism and the Crisis of Meaning* that it is only rare individuals who relish the crisis of meaning brought about by disenchantment, leaving “the majority of people feel[ing] insecure and lost in a confusing world full of possibilities of interpretation...” (Berger and Luckmann, 1995: p. 41). On the other hand, Berger (1998: p. 412) boasted “a profound respect for the right of every individual to give meaning to his own life,” believing in “the sanctity of the human person.” Indeed, from his earliest writings Berger sought to refute all forms of social determinism to ensure, in existentialist fashion, the protection of individual freedom (e.g., Berger, 1963).

Still, there exists a tension between Berger’s classical secularization theory and his own personal religious trajectory: in *The Sacred Canopy* Berger proposes that modern science – and sociology, with it – has produced a “crisis of religion.” However, in the same work, Berger is unyielding that it is pure folly to suppose that sociology can rationally undermine religious faith—and, as we’ve seen, he saw no problem with retaining his own. How do we make sense of this tension? Not long after publishing *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger published *A Rumor of Angels* – written less for sociologists than for theologians – wherein he offers an explanation. Frustrated by the fact that *The Sacred Canopy* read “like a treatise on atheism, at least in parts” (Berger, 1969: p. ix), Berger notes that his, and other, versions of

classical secularization theory tend to focus narrowly on “*churchly* religiosity” (Berger, 1969: p. 5), thereby discounting Troeltsch’s third, mystical type of religion. Now, we would argue that this neglect was not because Berger was unaware of it, but rather because he saw it as numerically insignificant (Berger, 1969: p. 7), while conceiving of his own mystical trajectory as exceptional rather than the rule. However, in later publications in the ensuing years, this changes. Berger gradually breaks away from the standard interpretation of Weber’s disenchantment thesis to produce a sophisticated sociological theory about what remains merely implicit in original Weber’s analysis: why “mystic religion” remains one of the last viable religious options in modernity.

4.3. Berger on Mystical Enchantment in a Disenchanted World

Following Gary Dorrien, it seems reasonable to see the publication of *A Rumor of Angels* as a key turning point in Berger’s personal religious life: “All of his subsequent religious thinking flows from his late-1960s turn to the experiencing religious subject” (Dorrien, 2001: p. 34). This is most conspicuous in *The Heretical Imperative*, published roughly a decade later, in which Berger refines and extends the theory of pluralism he introduced in *The Sacred Canopy*. Berger (1979: p. 11) argues that with the pluralization of plausibility structures and worldviews in modernity has come a shift “from fate to choice.” As a result, we are no longer guaranteed to unthinkingly inherit the religious worldview of our parents, but are instead forced to choose to either do so or not. The implication, Berger maintains, is that we must all become heretics (“heresy” comes for the Greek verb *hairein*, meaning “to choose”):

The premodern individual was linked to his gods in the same inexorable destiny that dominated most of the rest of his existence; modern man is faced with the necessity of choosing between gods, a plurality of which are socially available to him. If the typical condition of premodern man is one of religious certainty, it follows that that of modern man is one of religious doubt. (1979: p. 27)

For Berger, the “heretical imperative” and the doubt it entails spell trouble for organized religion as it drastically reduces the plausibility of religious worldviews: while the plurality of life-options gives credence to relativism, the ascent of the empirical sciences lends credence to historicism. The external world (ideologies, institutions, social roles) thus

becomes open to doubt. Religious authority grounded in an external structure—be it a text, a community of believers, or a specific organization—becomes vulnerable to these corrosive forces of relativization and historicization. This logically speaking leaves individuals in search of existential and moral certainty with no other option than looking within, a development that is inherent to modern life according to Berger: “modernization and subjectivization are cognate processes” (Berger, 1979: p. 20).

The Heretical Imperative deviates significantly from a purely “value free” sociological framework to consider “the possibilities of religious affirmation” which present themselves in light of the heretical imperative. Against what he calls the “deductive” and “reductive” possibilities, which entail, respectively, returning to religious orthodoxy and discarding religion altogether, Berger endorses the “inductive possibility,” exemplified by Friedrich Schleiermacher’s theological liberalism. “The inductive option,” he explains, “is to turn to experience as the ground of all religious affirmations – one’s own experience, to whatever extent this is possible” (Berger, 1979: p. 62). Berger contends that this form of religion is the only one that can be reconciled with the heretical imperative that defines modernity; for by grounding one’s religiosity in subjective experience it harmonizes with the process of subjectivization that is produced by pluralism, and cannot be rationally refuted by the empirical sciences (1979: p. 126).

It remains open to doubt whether Berger’s “inductive possibility” can actually yield the theological results he believes it can.³ But what is clear is that Berger’s “inductive possibility” owes more than a little to William James’s conception of religion. And indeed, Berger does not shy away from admitting this, writing that, “At the heart of the religious phenomenon is prereflective, pretheoretical experience” (1979: pp. 36, 187). Thus, the later Berger came to agree with both James and Weber that religion, at its essence, is not cognitive but fundamentally experiential: “religion is not primarily an activity of intellectuals, indeed cannot be understood as a primarily theoretical endeavour. The fundamental religious impulse is not to theorize about transcendence but to worship it” (Berger, 1969: p. 108).

Yet, much like in Weber’s case, it is hard to conclude from this that Berger was himself a mystic. He would certainly not like this characterization. One reason is that he remained firmly committed to Lutheranism and did not wish to endorse any form of religious individualism or antinomianism (1979: p. xiv). Another reason is that Berger conceived of “mysticism” more narrowly than Troeltsch did, namely as a quest to “merge into union with the divine, whether indirectly within [one’s] own consciousness or through an experience of unity with the natural universe” (Berger, 1979: p. 172). Indeed, this led Berger to set

Schleiermacher's inductive approach apart from mysticism. But if we conceive of mysticism in the way Troeltsch does – as “simply the insistence upon a direct inward and present religious experience” – then this naturally includes not only the mystic who eschews all organized religion, but also those who seek to supplement “traditional forms of worship by means of a personal and living stimulus.” In fact, Troeltsch (1992: p. 802) himself categorized Schleiermacher as an example of the mystic type, calling him one of the “great idealistic mystical thinkers of recent times.” While mysticism scholar Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh (2020: p. 533) observes that Schleiermacher's connection of faith “to a subjective, mystical consciousness in the inner depths of the human personality” demonstrates “a considerable influence of mysticism over Protestant liberalism despite their alleged historical contrast.” Thus, we think it is reasonable to argue that Berger's “inductive approach” to religion ultimately, if inadvertently, endorses mystical religion. Even though Berger himself may not have been willing to admit this, his personal religiosity can nevertheless be characterized as a type of mysticism after all.

4.4. Berger's Return to Weber's Original Legacy

Just before the end of the twentieth century, Berger (1999) famously disavowed the classical secularization theory he had championed since the 1960s. In its stead, he now acknowledged rationalization and pluralization as the central modernizing forces, but no longer equated them with secularization. Rather, he argued that they lead religion to become *compartmentalized*, both institutionally and cognitively (see Berger, 2014). Reflecting on this theoretical about-face Berger (2012b: p. 314) writes, “I think I held the misleading notion of some sort of unified consciousness, religious or secular. I had overlooked the (in retrospect obvious) possibility that an individual may be both religious and secular.” So, according to the later Berger, while secular discourses might be institutionalized in much of public life, producing disenchantment, many people can, and do, continue to believe in private: “The modern individual can develop, and in many cases has indeed developed, the capacity to manage both religious and secular definitions of reality, depending on which is directly relevant to the issue at hand” (Berger, 2014: p. 57).

These later reflections correct the one-sidedness of Berger's earlier interpretation of Weber's account of disenchantment. For, as we have repeatedly stressed, disenchantment does not necessitate the demise of religion *tout court* – only religion of a certain kind.

Furthermore, while it is undeniably the case that Berger's about-face had much to do with his empirical observations of religious developments in the developing world (he was particularly impressed by the emergence of the Charismatic movement in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere), his change of mind regarding the fate of religion in modernity also appears to have had more personal origins. After spending decades learning to balance his secular (sociological) and religious (mystical) identities—what he sometimes called his “dual citizenship” (Berger and Kellner, 1981: p. 119)—it may have occurred to him that perhaps he was not unique in doing so. Be this as it may, the later Berger came to conclude that “for most believers there is not a stark either/or dichotomy between faith and secularity but rather a fluid construction of both/and” (Berger, 2014: p. x).

Near the end of his life, Berger thus theorized what was already present in Weber's original account of disenchantment: to avoid succumbing to “the cold skeleton hands of rational orders” (Weber, 1946: p. 347) a strategy of segregation is called for, combining a rationalist public rejection of enchantment with a romantic celebration of private life. This is, as Berger puts it, “the prototypical cognitive balancing act of modernity” (Berger, 2014: p. xii).

5. Conclusion

While most contemporary sociologists of religion agree that mystical religion – typically referred to as “spirituality” – has become increasingly widespread since the 1960s, much research on the topic remains overly descriptive and neglects the question of what actually drives this spiritual turn. To shed light on this we have discussed Max Weber's and Peter Berger's analyses of disenchantment and secularization as well as their private stances vis-à-vis religion. Our argument is that they both aimed to protect the very ultimate meaning their rationalist commitments to disenchanting science threatened to undermine. Their works and lives thus not only challenge accounts of the radical incompatibility of science and religion, but also shed light on how and why disenchantment has sparked a turn to “spirituality” in modernity. This has happened because the latter pathway holds special appeal to those who, not unlike Weber and Berger, seek to reconcile an intellectual commitment to disenchanting science with an abiding longing for a meaningful cosmos.

Of course, it goes without saying that Weber would have little time for talk of “spirituality,” seeing in it nothing more than faux-mysticism or a kind of romantic flight from

reality no different from the type he condemned in his day. Moreover, to the extent that he was in fact a mystic—an issue that will likely forever remain a mystery—this led him, paradoxically, to embrace an ascetic scientific ideal, largely antithetical to the kind of esoteric sciences associated with “New Age spirituality.” And while Berger was certainly alive to witness the birth of the “new religious consciousness,” he held deeply ambivalent feelings toward it (see Berger, 1974). Nevertheless, none of this discounts the fact that the theoretical legacies Weber and Berger have left us, as much as their personal stances vis-à-vis science and religion, shed significant light on the spiritual turn typical of late modern life.

Furthermore, Egil Asprem (2014: p. 5) has insightfully suggested that, from a more critical vantage point, disenchantment does not in the first place entail a historically unfolding process, but rather a “cluster of related intellectual problems, faced by historical actors.” This perspective does not deny the reality of disenchantment, but maintains that it is only a reality—and a problem—for *certain kinds of people*, namely those who personally experience what Weber called the cold skeleton hands of meaninglessness. More specifically, it is the intellectually-inclined who are most likely to experience disenchantment as a problem, having internalized what Josephson-Storm (2017) calls the “regulative ideal” of modernity. This is why it is not surprising that research shows that “spirituality” is most commonly found among the educated classes (Houtman and Mascini, 2002; Höllinger and Smith, 2002; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). Indeed, long before Berger spoke of the “heretical imperative,” Troeltsch identified religion rooted in subjective experience as far less vulnerable to rationalist or scientific critique than those of the church or sect type, calling mysticism “the secret religion of the educated masses” (Troeltsch, 1992: p. 794; see also Campbell, 1978; Lewis, Currie and Oman-Reagan, 2016).

Paradoxically, then, a commitment to disenchanting intellectual rationalism drives the spiritual turn in modernity due to a felt need to reconcile the former with what Gouldner (1962: p. 212) calls “the romantic residue of modern man.” This happens because such rationalism dismisses re-enchanting scientific musings about universally binding and firmly grounded “objective” meaning, musings that reveal what is important and trivial, what is good and evil. In *The Consciousness Reformation* Robert Wuthnow (1976: p. 4) reminds us that such rationalism is especially hard to sustain and endure in the study of society, because a sociological perspective “understands life to be governed chiefly by social forces rather than individuals.” As a result, “An individual does not simply choose his own goals, he is socialized into them,” so that sociology effectively denies the prospect of human freedom, by “making the individual a product of social forces” (1976: p. 113). Precisely this denial of the

possibility of freedom and personal authenticity explains the appeal of mysticism, or “spirituality,” which promises something quite different than unfreedom and social determination. For according to the mystic, “The forces that influence his life most are his own intense experiences. In such experiences he can alter time and space. He can experience God. He can escape the social and cultural forces that impinge upon him” (Wuthnow, 1976: p. 5). This, then, is the appeal of mystic religion (“spirituality”) in a disenchanted world: it promises a means of liberating the individual from the determining forces of society and culture. Or, as Wuthnow (1967: p. 125) explains, “The ecstatic experience becomes a way of escaping the charge that all ideas and beliefs are simply the products of socialization.”

And yet, the sociological truth is that mystical religion (or “spirituality”) can never wholly escape rationalization and routinization altogether. For while talk of “spirituality” without “religion” may entail a search for a “pure,” “authentic,” and institutionally-unmediated religion, it also signals a longstanding and recognizable mystical religious tradition, whose key characteristic is that it denies its status as a tradition (Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Houtman and Aupers, 2007; Watts, 2022). Indeed, this was Troeltsch’s key insight: the anti-institutionalism at the core of “mystic religion” is what spawns its defining features. Thus, a host of studies make clear that talk of “spirituality” entails a clear cultural logic, such as the notions that the sacred is not external to the self but lies deep within; that emotions, intuitions, and experiences are emanations of this “true self”; and that a “pure” spirituality lies at the basis of all world religions (Campbell, 1978; Campbell, 2002 [1972]; Houtman and Aupers, 2010). What’s more, this cultural logic is such that it fuels never-ending cycles of disenchantment with routinized forms, followed by quests for new “more authentic” options. As historian of religion Wouter Hanegraaff, keen observer of esotericism and New Age “spirituality,” explains with remarkable sociological insight: “individualism functions as an in-built defense mechanism against social organization and institutionalization: as soon as any group of people involved with New Age ideas begins to take up ‘cultic’ characteristics, this very fact already distances them from the basic individualism of New Age spirituality” (Hanegraaff, 2002: p. 259).

In sum, to the extent that our arguments in this article are correct, it would seem that many of those who turn to “spirituality” in modernity unwittingly follow in the venerable footsteps of Weber and Berger. And while they may do this in ways that these two towering sociological figures would vehemently disapprove of, they nevertheless chart the same time-honored path, which ultimately seeks to “adjudicate the tensions between two vital Western

traditions: between reason and faith, between knowledge and feeling, between classicism and romanticism, between the head and the heart” (Gouldner, 1962: p. 213).

Notes

¹ We can think here of approaches as diverse as orthodox Marxism, to positivism, to various esoteric sciences—all of which claim to use the scientific method to uncover “true” or “objective” meaning in the world.

² It therefore becomes noteworthy that “Science as a Vocation” was a public lecture which Weber delivered as a scientist to an audience of fellow scientists—a fact that too many have overlooked.

³ For it is one thing to claim one has experienced God, it is something else entirely to infer from this the truth of any historically-specific religious tradition. No doubt, Berger was himself aware of this problem (see Berger, 1979: p. 140). Yet he remained hesitant to acknowledge that grounding religious truth-claims in individual conscience or subjective experience limits the affirmation of the truth of historically-contingent Lutheran dogmas.

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