Chan Kun-Sun, “Religion and Modern Consciousness: Reflections on Peter L. Berger’s Idea of “religious pluralism””

Modernity, according to the secularization theory, leads to secularization, and the significance of religion will decrease in society. The empirical evidence does not give support to this theory, as exemplified by the two most dynamic religious movement in the world today, namely resurgent Islam and the Pentecostal movement. Are we witnessing the process of counter-secularization? Peter L. Berger thinks that it is not helpful to understand our present situation as either secularization or counter-secularization. He suggests that pluralism may be a better concept to be used in understanding the situation of religion in the contemporary world. In describing our present pluralist world, Berger argues, “There is indeed a secular discourse resulting from modernity, but it can coexist with religious discourses that are not secular at all.”

In this discussion, I will examine the significance of the coexistence of secular and religious discourses in modern society. In particular, I will discuss whether this coexistence will lead to the secularization of the religious consciousness so that the transcendental and the supernatural elements in the religious consciousness will become more accommodated to the secular worldview.

Li Kit-Man, “The Problem of Reductionism in the Study of Religion Revisited”

Traditionally, a number of scholars in religious studies argue that religion can only be explained in religious terms. All attempts at explaining religion by non-religious factors can only result in distortions. This position implies that explanations of religion must be derived from the position of a believer.

Critics of this position argue that the insistence on religious explanations of religion undermines all explanations of religion that take a purely social scientific perspective. That is apologetic and unscientific. Moreover, social scientists not believing in religion deny religious doctrines and practices as holding any truth. Religious explanations of religion are, for them, still unintelligible.

It seems that we are facing an unresolvable dilemma. In fact, this dispute emerges again and again in the past three to four decades.

This paper argues that one main issue behind this dispute revolves around the degree of relevance of religious content for explaining religion. Almost no scholars undertaking religious studies would deny that religious believers’ own understanding should be taken seriously. The point of argument is: What does it mean to take it seriously? Is there any possibility that what believers accept in their religious faith is
in fact false? Is it possible that what they accept is in fact products of social forces external to them or unconscious motivations embedded in their rationality?

Advocates of rational choice theory of religion (RCT) contribute some effort to break this impasse. However, the self-centred conception of human nature of the theory reduces religion to a human investment and renders the self-sacrificial and self-negating part of it unintelligible. Orsi recalls the concept of the holy to explicate the “reality” of religion. This attempt works exactly in a direction opposite to RCT in that the holy is supernatural and the experience of the holy is self-transcending.

This paper argues that, while they face attacks from various sides, both RCT and Orsi hold some truth. They provide insights for drawing out a more comprehensive and differentiated picture of religion. That constitutes one important step towards dealing with the above dilemma. Also, Orsi brings out some discussions on the experience of the holy. The concept is useful for this purpose but needs further clarification. It may refer to a transient self-transforming inner experience. It can also mean experience associated with long-term struggle to achieve spiritual progress in religious practice.


This discussion aims to demonstrate that Rodney Stark’s rational choice approach to religion is inadequate for understanding religious experience and behaviors related to supernatural beliefs in spite of its insistence on the supernatural assumptions of religion. To begin, I outline the rational choice theory of religion with emphasis on its assumptions about means-end rationality and the idea of otherworldly rewards. Then, the Catholic doctrine, in itself a supernatural concept, of redemptive suffering is introduced. Illustrative data from Catholic saints and some empirical data gathered from contemporary Hong Kong lay Catholics are presented. The data presented show that there is a difference between saints and lay Catholics in terms of their understanding of the supernatural. Two results are found. The first result is about the limitation of means-end framework in understanding the meaning of the supernatural in Catholicism. Second, contemporary lay Catholics who have a thin understanding of the supernatural beliefs in Catholicism tend to be less able to undergo self-transformation in face of severe life’s crises such as serious illness and disability.