
*Roundtable on Global Reflections on the Fiftieth Anniversary of
The Sacred Canopy*

Peter Berger's Theory of Secularization in Latin America: The Two Sacred Canopies

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The social studies of religion have a longstanding presence in Latin America, and Peter Berger has had a ubiquitous presence in this subject area. In Argentinean universities, for instance, sociology of religion has been taught consistently for the past sixty years. At least two regular courses are offered each semester in the schools of sociology at the University of Buenos Aires. And there, as in other higher education institutions, Berger's *oeuvre*, in particular *The Sacred Canopy*, has been part of the syllabi of these courses.

While the social study of religion has been present in Latin America since the 1960s (Frigerio 1993), it was in the 1980s when sociologists consolidated these inquiries as a specific field of study (cf. Martín 2007, De la Torre and Martín 2016). These initial efforts increased interest in the topic, and the study of religion developed and became noteworthy especially during the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s (Herrera 2004). Similarly, in Brazil, scholarly production throughout these two decades (in terms of research projects, publications, dissertations, and so on) increased at a higher rate than any other subfield of sociology (cf Montero

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2004, 140–42; Pierucci 1999, 238). And it was during this “golden period” for research on religion that Peter Berger’s work became canonical. His theory of secularization and his metaphor of the sacred canopy especially, as well as his later turn toward desecularization (Berger 1997, 2000, 2016), were discussed intensively in the Latin American arena (Mariz 1997, 2000; Frigerio and Wynarczyk 2008, among others) and were also included in the teaching of sociology of religion¹ in the university (Martín 2011, 2014).

In this article, I will analyze Peter Berger’s presence as a canonical author in Latin American sociology of religion and how *The Sacred Canopy* has been received, appropriated, and criticized vis-à-vis scholarship produced in the region.

PETER BERGER AND THE SACRED CANOPY: THE CONTEMPORARY CANON

As Linda Woodhead (2001) pointed out, Peter Berger became an essential part of the canon in the postwar study of religion in North America and Europe, but also in Latin America. Berger’s publications were regularly translated to Spanish soon after they were published in English. The *Sacred Canopy*’s first translation into Spanish was only four years after the first edition (in 1971 in Spain, by Editorial Kairós). A new Spanish edition was published in Argentina in 1977, by Amorrortu Editores, followed by several new editions and reprints since then. A translation into Portuguese took almost a decade: it was not translated in Brazil until 1985, by the Catholic publisher Paulinas.

Berger is extensively referenced in Latin American publications and features in many courses on religion taught in the region.² With no major distinction between undergraduate and graduate courses in universities in Latin America, syllabi contents for sociology of religion courses are often divided in two: a first part dedicated to theoretical debates, and a second part dealing with contemporary subjects and case studies. This second part, in turn, usually has a section dedicated to the local context,

¹While I will be referring here to sociology of religion, it is important to notice that in Latin American scholarship on this area there is no a strong disciplinary division between sociology and anthropology. In this sense, disciplinary lines are blurred, and they share methodological and theoretical approaches in both research and the teaching of religion at undergraduate and graduate levels. Peter Berger’s work on secularization (including both *The Sacred Canopy* and his later work) appears regularly in sociology, anthropology, and sciences of religion syllabi and publications.

²I analyzed fifty-nine syllabi of sociology and anthropology of religion courses, obtained from more than thirty institutions of higher education in Latin America, mostly in Argentina and Brazil. Syllabi include regular courses (those offered every semester) and special courses at undergraduate and graduate levels that included religion as a main topic.

which “corroborates” theoretical considerations with local authors and/or local illustrations. As I have shown elsewhere (Martín 2009b), in addition to the “canonical-classics,” namely Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, Berger has appeared in the theoretical section of syllabi since the end of the 1980s and become an established theoretical reference in the 1990s together with Pierre Bourdieu. By the 2000s, Berger was established as a new classic, one of the key authors offering a theoretical approach for understanding transformations in the contemporary religious landscape.

In parallel with Berger's adoption as a ubiquitous voice in sociology of religion syllabi, Berger appeared as a recurrent reference in local debates in the social sciences of religion. Examining the reference list of all articles published in *Ciencias Sociales y Religión*,³ one of the most well-known journals on religion in the region, Peter Berger appears as the fourth most-cited author, while the third most-cited author (with only one more citation than Berger) is Danièle Hervieu-Leger (perhaps the main influence for Argentinean and Mexican studies on religion), and the second most-cited is Max Weber. Bourdieu is the most cited scholar among the North Atlantic authors (cf. Martín 2011). These authors are the main providers of theoretical frameworks and concepts in all the articles I analyzed. As could be expected, debates taught in Latin American classrooms replicate the citation patterns of publication in the sociology of religion.

Berger is also prominent as a theorist of religion in textbooks and readers produced in the region (see, e.g., Soneira et al. 1996; Rolim 1997). Unlike textbooks produced in Europe or the United States and later translated into Spanish or Portuguese, these religion readers are prepared by local scholars who write chapters on the canonical authors ranging from Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, to Bourdieu, Hervieu-Leger, and Berger, among others, in the light of local concerns. One of the main readers containing Berger's work was edited by Cecilia Mariz, a Brazilian sociologist and Berger's former PhD student, who published critical readings and introductions to his theory of secularization (Mariz 1997, 2000).

NOT ONE SACRED CANOPY, BUT TWO

Latin American authors find an elective affinity with the Bergerian proposal of religious monopoly. The metaphor of sacred canopy has been

³*Ciencias Sociales y Religión* is a Spanish-Portuguese bilingual journal published by the Association of Social Scientists of Religion in Mercosur since 1999 to disseminate Latin America's academic production on religion. Between 1999 and the end of 2010, 13 issues were published, and I analyzed the reference lists of all the 105 articles included in these volumes.

used, in Latin American studies on religion, in two ways. On the one hand, a number of scholars support the idea of a golden age of Catholicism, which ruled as the hegemonic and “cultural” religion of Latin America from colonization to the first half of the twentieth century. This is the mainstream approach in Latin American academia, which considers the Catholic Church as a key sociopolitical actor and foundation for Latin American identity, and finds an echo of this in Berger’s proposal that religious institutions hold a monopoly position within society. If for Berger (1999) religion is a sacred canopy that functions as the ultimate provider of legitimation for social activities, Catholicism in Latin America would occupy this place of privilege. In many cases, the state itself endorses this religious monopoly. Some authors in the region have started from this assumption to analyze alleged changes in the religious landscape, constructing an ideal typical past in which the Catholic Church was central to Latin American culture and history to prove the existence of a novel religious pluralization and the rise of a new religious market. In this way, the idea that “Catholicism is no longer the hegemonic or monopoly religion that it was until at least the mid-twentieth century” (Parker 2016, 18) continues to be repeated, in spite of several voices warning about the need for empirical evidence to support this claim (Carozzi 2006; Frigerio 2008). Indeed, different works (Prandi 1996; Arboleda 2005; Esquivel et al. 2002; Mallimaci 2002, 2008; Parker 2005, 2016, among many others) depart from what De la Torre (1999) calls a theoretical premise: the idea that Catholicism was monopolist and that Latin America is mostly Catholic. For most authors, however, “[Catholicism] continues to be a majority church and in most countries it still enjoys (tacit, not legal anymore) privileged status, but the Latin American religious field is now plural and its symbolic semantic borders are no longer closed” (Parker 2016, 18). These authors find, then, an elective affinity with the Bergerian proposal of religious monopoly.

On the other hand, critics of this view suggest that what precedes and predominates in Latin American religion, both over and through Catholicism, is a folk cosmovision: a local and also cultural logic that prevails in parallel, and in spite of Christian denominationalism—be they Catholicism, traditional Christian churches, Pentecostals, or Neopentecostals. These critics argue that this cosmovision survives because of its creativity and adaptability to any transformation in the religious landscape. Research on popular religion found in the metaphor of the sacred canopy a theoretical framework to explain a so-called specificity of the Latin American religion, of whatever official type. Authors like Parker (1996), Marzal (2002), or Semán (2001), among others, state that

there is a peculiar logic that cut across the experience of the people. This native cosmological view is defined as “an alternative to the illustrated rationality and to the kind of rationalized faith, which is its byproduct” (Parker 1996, 192). This thesis of “a different logic” in Latin America is based on the premise that “in Latin America there is a worldview according to which the sacred cosmos, inhabited by spirits and souls, is a kind of ‘symbolic umbrella of protection’ against the adversities of this life.” Literally, to Cristian Parker, this is “a sort of *sacred canopy* that makes it possible to re-legitimize a *nomos* which structures the meaning of life” (Parker 1996, 317). In a similar path, Semán (2001, 45) coined the concept of a “cosmological popular view,” a cultural logic that articulates in a unique totality the relationships between heaven, nature, and human beings, combined in a cosmic and harmonic whole. This cosmological perspective precedes any denominational tradition or religious identification: in this sense, there is a true “sacred canopy” in Latin America that does not need to fight against modernity or secularization.

In discussing Berger, Parker argues that regardless of religious pluralism, religion does not lose its symbolic weight in the construction of the meaning of life and *nomos*: religion is “restoring meaning in the midst of uncertainty, generating new hopes for the vast majority of the Latin American population,” and “is a sociological and cultural fact that has unforeseen consequences on the very construction of Latin American culture” (Parker 1996, 127–28). Trying to validate empirically this negative correlation between religion (Catholicism) and modernity, a number of Latin American authors consider folk practices and beliefs to be the deeper and most authentic sacred canopy, either as answers to “the anguish, privations, and despair that several social sectors are suffering” (Mallimaci 2002, 29) or as a “different logic,” in Parker’s terms. Thus, rejecting Berger’s statement that modernity leads to religious pluralism, and therefore to secularization, Parker argues that in Latin America structures of plausibility are still founded in popular religion, maintaining its capacity to offer nomic legitimization (Parker 1996, 124). The persistence and diversity of popular religion, according to Alejandro Frigerio (2008, 25), shows it is impossible that a unique religious institution could be capable of fulfilling all religious necessities in a given society, because even when there was a strongly regulated religious market (which is not the same as a monopolistic market, as Frigerio highlights), there always existed a “black market” of religious practices and beliefs, which, for some authors (Wright and Ceriani 2011) are not simple remnants of premodern forms, but rather alternative ways to achieve modernity.

BERGER'S SECULARIZATION THEORY: A SHORT BLANKET FOR LATIN AMERICAN DIVERSITY?

Peter Berger's theory of secularization was introduced to Latin American debate initially through *The Sacred Canopy*, and later via his critics. Authors like Frigerio (2000, 2008), Mariano (2008), and Frigerio and Wynarczyk (2008), among others, introduced the theory of religious economies proposed by Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Larry Iannaccone, and suggested a provocative approach to analyzing the dynamics of religious diversity in the region that was necessarily mediated by a discussion of Berger and *The Sacred Canopy*. The debate around the theory of the religious market and Berger's approach to secularization applied to Latin American phenomena brought new light to the analysis of religious pluralism and changes in the religious landscape after the end of dictatorships in the region in the 1980s. This is a key discussion because ideas about the religious marketplace in Latin America have usually been understood from Peter Berger's perspective. Frigerio (2008) signals that Latin American debate, too much influenced by Berger's *Sacred Canopy*, would be benefitted by introducing a fresh reading of rational choice theory and its approach to the religious economy. Rational choice theory's idea of a gradation of regulation in religious economies is especially relevant to understanding the contemporary religious landscape in Latin America. According to Frigerio, the Latin American religious landscape is not defined exclusively in terms of monopoly or market, but as a continuum of possibilities, involving different degrees of regulation and the action of different variables that affect the freedom with which individuals can choose their religious options. In this regard, there will always be other systems of beliefs that may not acquire the status of religion but will emerge in a situation of less regulation. To Berger, the advent of religious pluralism introduces important qualitative changes in the character of religion, which he considers in mainly negative terms. Many authors in Latin America (cf. De la Torre and Martín 2016) have followed this path, while for Berger there is a kind of degradation of religion in the situation of religious pluralism, because to compete in the market they must transform their structures and adapt their message to the public. In this sense, Berger's criticism of religious pluralism ends up reinforcing an academic common-sense view that the Catholic Church is the central actor for understanding the regional reality and a legitimate object of research for the social sciences (Carozzi 2006).

In *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger asserts that the result of religious pluralism is always a negative one, because it sinks religion into a crisis of credibility by multiplying the number of competing plausibility structures. Following Frigerio (2008), the main drawback of Berger's theory of

secularization is its failure to empirically prove that a religious market situation degrades the specific characteristics and functions of religion. On the contrary, in Latin America, pluralization processes have transformed the religious landscape, though not as a direct consequence of a classic process of modernization in the social structure (cf. [Parker 1996](#), 128). As Parker explains, religion, and especially the religion of impoverished masses in urban settings, becomes a “strategy of survival” that restores, through the sacred and protective cosmos, “the *nomos* that removes all insecurity and destructive threat of meaningful order” ([Parker 1996](#), 132).

FINAL THOUGHTS

The study of religion has been key to understanding the social and political environment of Latin America. According to a number of scholars, both Catholicism and popular religion created the hegemonic Latin American identity, culturally differentiating the region from its Anglo Saxon neighbors in North America and northern Europe, where the majority of the population was Protestant (cf. [De la Torre and Martin 2016](#)). Peter Berger and his *Sacred Canopy* offered a perfect theoretical framework for these interpretations, making him and his book canonical.

Thus, in Latin American research on religion, Berger's metaphor has been useful for those who criticize modernizing processes and the advance of secularization and propose pluralistic and alternative modernities that include the continuous presence of a particular cosmological view. And it is also useful for those who focus on the importance of the Catholic Church in the region, where Catholicism earlier had the monopolistic function described by Berger, giving to a theoretical premise the quality of historical process, which allows for discussion of the impact of religious pluralism and a “new” market situation.

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