Protestantism and the quest for certainty

by Peter L. Berger in the August 26, 1998 issue

In the course of my career as a sociologist of religion I made one big mistake and had one big insight (arguably not such a bad record). The big mistake, which I shared with almost everyone who worked in this area in the 1950s and '60s, was to believe that modernity necessarily leads to a decline in religion. The big insight was that pluralism undermines the taken-for-grantedness of beliefs and values. It took me some time to relate the insight to the mistake. And it has only been very recently that I understood the implications for the position of Protestantism in the contemporary world.

Modernity, as has become increasingly clear, is not necessarily linked to secularization. It is so in a few areas of the world, notably in Western Europe, and in some internationally visible groups, notably the humanistically educated intelligentsia. Most of the world today is as religious as it ever was and, in a good many locales, more religious than ever. The reasons for the above-mentioned exceptions are intriguing, but cannot concern us here.

Pluralism, for our purposes, can simply be defined as the coexistence and social interaction of people with very different beliefs, values and lifestyles. This state of affairs is indeed generally associated with modernity, but it does not necessarily lead to secularization, as is most clearly shown by America, a "lead society" (to use Talcott Parsons's term) both for modernity and for pluralism. Rather, the effects of pluralism are more subtle, but nonetheless of great importance: pluralism influences not so much *what* people believe as *how* they believe.

Throughout most of history human beings have lived in situations in which there was general consensus on the nature of reality and on the norms by which one should lead one's life. This consensus was almost everywhere grounded in religion and it was taken for granted. The pluralistic situation necessarily changes this, for reasons that are not at all mysterious. They have to do with the basic fact that we are social

beings and that our view of reality is shaped by socialization, first in childhood and later in the relationships of adult life. Where socialization processes are uniform, this view of reality is held with a high degree of taken-for-granted certainty. Pluralism ensures that socialization processes are *not* uniform and, consequently, that the view of reality is much less firmly held.

Put differently, certainty is now much harder to come by. People may still hold the same beliefs and values that were held by their predecessors in more uniform situations, but they will hold them in a different manner: what before was given through the accident of birth now becomes a matter of *choice*. Pluralism brings on an era of many choices and, by the same token, an era of uncertainty.

Historically, of course, Protestantism was itself an important factor in bringing about this situation, and not only in America. It was the Protestant Reformation that undermined once and for all the unity of Western Christendom. Its principle of individual conscience carried within it from the beginning the potential for an ever-expanding variety of Christian groupings. This development was not at all intended by the Reformers, but history is always the arena of unintended consequences.

As to America, the combination of its immigrant population and its regime of religious liberty necessarily made it into the most pluralistic society in the modern world. Eventually every religious tradition, however reluctantly, was profoundly affected by the simple fact that it no longer controlled a captive population of adherents, that the latter now had the choice of staying on or going somewhere else. Protestantism, especially American Protestantism, had to come to terms with this situation first. It is still faced with its very great challenge.

There are individuals who thrive on a situation in which nothing can be taken for granted, in which they are faced with a multitude of choices. Perhaps they could be called the virtuosi of pluralism. But for most people the situation makes for a great deal of unease. This response may derive from profound aspects of human nature. There is what John Dewey has called "the quest for certainty"--certainty at least when it comes to the most important questions of life. The clash between the built-in uncertainty of the pluralistic situation and the urge for at least a measure of certainty helps explain a rather curious phenomenon in contemporary culture--the alternation of relativism and absolutist claims to truth.

To say that nothing can be taken for granted any longer means that all claims to truth are relativized. In the extreme case this leads to a kind of nihilism which asserts that not only can one not be certain of anything but that the very idea of truth is illusory. A number of so-called postmodernist theories have legitimated this idea, but it can also be found among people who have never heard of currently fashionable French philosophers. In this view, everyone has the right to his own opinion and the only remaining virtue is an all-embracing tolerance. At first such relativism is experienced as a great liberation, especially for individuals coming out of some narrow provincial milieu.

After a while, though, the liberation itself is experienced as a burden, precisely because of the aforementioned yearning for certainty. At that point the allegedly liberated individuals become susceptible to any offer of renewed certainty. This susceptibility leads to a potential for conversion to any doctrine that comes along with an absolute claim to truth. The convert now embraces a pose of unshakable certainty. Not to put too fine a point to it, he becomes a fanatic.

This movement has often been observed among converts to this or that "fundamentalist" sect, whose doctrine may be religious but could just as well be secular. The recipe on offer by all such groups is always the same: Come and join us, and we will give you the certainty for which you yearn. Then the nihilist becomes a fanatic. However, the tightly knit community into which the convert has been initiated may once more be felt to be constraining, as much or more so than the old provincial or traditional milieu. Then a new alleged liberation may occur, and so one moves back again into the relativizing dynamic of the pluralistic situation.

The dialectic between relativism and the competing claims to absolute truth is ongoing. In every nihilist there is a fanatic screaming to get out, and conversely every fanatic is a potential nihilist. Most people, of course, are neither fanatics nor nihilists; for them, the dialectic plays itself out in less extreme forms. But they too are caught in the dilemma of reconciling their nostalgia for certainty with a social reality in which such certainty is very hard to come by.

I will allow myself a more personal observation here. Some time ago I made a discovery that somewhat surprised me: I found that I could communicate much better with people who disagreed with me but who were uncertain about their position than with people who agreed with me but who held our shared views in a posture of certainty. This was so in matters of political or other secular relevance,

but also, emphatically, in matters of religious belief. This led me to a fantasy of a sort of ecumene of troubled souls (I like to call them "the uncertainty-wallahs"). But it also led me to look again at the impact of pluralism on contemporary religion.

If one rejects the stark alternative of an open-ended relativism or some variant of absolutist retrenchment, one is faced with a simple but far-reaching question: How is one to live with uncertainty? More specifically, how is one to have religious beliefs and to lead a religious life in a state of uncertainty? The answer that suggests itself is prototypically Protestant: one can, indeed must, do so by faith. The answer can be put in even more explicitly Protestant language: *By faith alone--"sola fide."*

Conventional Christian language maintains that there is a contradiction between faith and lack of faith, belief and unbelief. The implication is that unbelief is sinful. This has never been very persuasive to me. God has not exactly made it easy for us to believe in him, and, it seems to me, a just God will not hold it against us if we don't manage the exercise. Be that as it may, it seems more plausible to me to propose a contradiction not between belief and unbelief but between belief and knowledge. If we know something, there is no reason to believe; conversely, if we say that we believe something, we are implying that we don't know. A world that is taken for granted is one in which people know (more accurately, think they know) what is true; they don't have to believe. Putting the contradiction in this way, one must then ask: Just what do we know when it comes to religion?

Clearly, there are some affirmations about which we can claim knowledge. The detailed delineation of this cognitive area can be left to the philosophers, but it certainly includes what is conveyed to me by direct sense experience (I know that I have hayfever, or that I have difficulties with my new computer); it also includes certain abstract logical or mathematical propositions; I think that it includes some moral perceptions (but that is another story). It emphatically does not include any scientific affirmations, which are always probabilistic in nature. But what about religion?

There are people, of course, who claim to have certain knowledge when it comes to their religious affirmations. If one assumes that God exists, one must inevitably concede the possibility that he has disclosed himself to some human beings more directly than to others. The scriptures of the great religious traditions contain in large part the testimony of such people. For them, terms like "belief" or "faith" make little sense, at least not in the sense these terms have for the rest of us; they know

what they are saying. Most of us (and, needless to say, I include myself in this large, religiously undistinguished company) find ourselves in a very different situation. Whether we like it or not, if we are honest, religion for us cannot be based on knowledge, only on belief. The question is how we cope with this situation. Can we live with it?

I'm persuaded that the answer is yes. And although I think that there is a distinctively Protestant form this answer can take, the option of this type of religious existence is not by any means limited to Protestants. A colleague of mine, Adam Seligman, a sociologist and an observant Jew, has coined the attractive term "epistemological modesty" to describe this religious posture. It is a mellow synthesis of skepticism and faith that, in principle, can be found in any religious tradition. A few months ago Seligman convened a conference to discuss the resources for this type of religion in the three great monotheistic traditions (it was, indeed, an ecumenical gathering of "uncertainty-wallahs"!).

One of the participants from Israel recounted a story from Talmudic literature. It went something like this: A group of rabbis were arguing over the right interpretation of a biblical text. Rabbi Eleazar, who had interpreted the text one way, was one of the authorities cited, as was Rabbi Yochanan, who had interpreted it differently. The rabbis could not agree. In the group there was also a mystic, an adept of the Kabbalah. He said that it was possible for him to enter into an ecstasy that would take him directly before the throne of the Almighty; he offered to do so and to ask God himself to give the correct interpretation. The group agreed, whereupon the mystic took off in his ecstasy, stood before the throne and addressed God: "King of the Universe, we cannot agree on this text. Can you give us the correct interpretation?"

God, who of course was himself occupied in the study of Torah, shuffled his papers, shook his head, and finally replied: "Well, Rabbi Eleazar says so-and-so, but Rabbi Yochanan says so-and-so, and then there is Rabbi Amitai who says so-and-so . . ."

I'm not altogether comfortable with this story. I'm inclined to think that, both from a Jewish and a Christian point of view, we should assume that God could indeed have given the right answer. In other words, I don't think that rabbinical Judaism held a "postmodernist" theory of truth! But the spirit of this story is appealing. And I think that one can translate it into Protestant terms.

If one acknowledges that one's religious existence is based on faith and not on knowledge, one must find a way of articulating this fact. Protestantism provides a very powerful articulation. Its principle of sola fide not only accepts the fact of uncertainty, but affirms that it is good. It provides the posture in which one can live with uncertainty without succumbing to a corrosive relativism. The same posture, however, implies that one refuses the various offers of certainty with which our situation abounds.

Many of these offers are not Christian or even religious. The proponents of various non-Christian religions frequently approach us in a stance of alleged certainty that can easily compete with the most hard-bitten Christian "fundamentalists." There are also offers of certainty by any number of political and other secular ideologies whose stance is equally "fundamentalist."

Within the Christian orbit a number of offers are on hand. Essentially they have been around for a long time, but they always take new doctrinal or organizational forms.

Around the turn of the century the Russian writer Vladimir Soloviev published his famous story about the Antichrist. In it he describes how the Antichrist, a great charismatic leader, seduced the great majority of Christians. He seduced the Catholics with a project for the final completion of canon law, the Protestants with a wonderfully endowed institute of biblical scholarship, the Orthodox with a commission to create the perfect liturgy. These three temptations do not correspond exactly with the certainty offers most prominent today, but they come close. Where, within the Christian orbit, are the major certainty offers to be found ?

One can seek certainty in the institution of the church. This has always been possible, in different ecclesial forms. The most impressive offer of this type has been, for a very long time, that of the Roman Catholic Church. Basing certainty on the institution of the church is also possible in other communities--among high-church Anglicans, among their Lutheran cousins (especially in Scandinavia), and of course in the Eastern churches. But no one can compete with Rome in the splendor of this offer--not Constantinople or Moscow, not Canterbury, certainly not Uppsala.

This splendor has diminished somewhat compared with earlier times--for instance, with the times when John Henry Newman and his friends in the Oxford Movement found their way, one by one, to Rome (while those who stayed behind found ever more complicated reasons why they did not, or not yet, go the same way). The

turbulence that gripped the Roman Catholic Church in the wake of Vatican II is the main reason for this diminished appeal (for example, it has been estimated that roughly the same number of people left the Church of England for Rome because the former decided to ordain women as the number of people who went the opposite way for the same reason or for related reasons). Still, there continues to be a powerful Roman attraction, and probably the most important reason for the attraction is the offer of certainty based on the institution.

Second, one can seek for certainty on the basis of an absolute understanding of the biblical text. This, of course, has always been a Protestant specialty, especially in its evangelical variants. Here it is not the institution but the text which is infallible--or, in the more appropriate language, inerrant. Infallibility at the core of the institution or inerrancy at the core if not in the entire text--the psychological gains of these claims are more or less the same.

The offer of certainty on the basis of the biblical text is, of course, powerfully present in American Protestantism. Whenever a question arises, one finds the answer in this or that biblical passage, and then nothing more can happen to one, so to speak. In one version of this procedure the Bible is opened at random and the answering text is the one on which the eye first falls. This latter practice might be termed "superstition" by some. That is an elastic term: Is it less "superstitious" to believe in the infallibility of the pope or of an ecumenical council? What is superstition to one person is to another evidence of God's continuing action in the world.

And third, one can seek certainty on the basis of one's own religious experience. This answer to the quest for certainty runs through almost all Christian communities, from the great mystics to the most recent flowering of Pentecostalism. One might call this the "Methodist" possibility. This was, after all, the "method" by which John Wesley and especially his less discriminating successors sought the certainty of salvation in the inwardness of religious experience. Wesley's "warmed heart" still pulsates throughout the hymnody of English-speaking Protestantism--"I know that my redeemer liveth"--and in the exalted assertiveness of "born-again" Christians.

Essentially the same "method," with this or that variation, thundered through the great American revival movements, from the First Great Awakening to Billy Graham. In a less noisy form one finds it in continental-European pietism. Without a doubt, its most powerful expression today is in the worldwide Pentecostal movement, which is rushing like a prairie fire through Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia, and which

is apparently beginning to make itself felt in Eastern Europe.

All three forms of alleged certainty have been considerably weakened by the modern human sciences--the certainty of the institution by historical scholarship and the social sciences, the certainty of the text by the findings of biblical criticism, and the certainty of inner experience by psychology and the sociology of knowledge. It seems to me, however, that these challenges were already anticipated in classical Protestantism (though, it must be said again, this was hardly the intention of the Reformers).

The absolutization of the institution was relativized by the notion of *ecclesia semper reformanda*, the absolutization of the text by the exegetical methods employed by Luther (one may refer here to his cavalier treatment of entire books of the biblical canon), and the absolutization of inner experience by the attacks on "enthusiasm" by mainline Lutheran, Calvinist and Anglican theologians. It is not an accident that the application of modern historical methods to the biblical literature began in Protestant theological institutions, especially in Germany. Here were ecclesiastically appointed theologians who, without hesitation, approached their own sacred scriptures in a spirit of critical inquiry--not, as the philosophes of the Enlightenment would have intended, in order to destroy faith, but on the contrary in order to arrive at a better understanding of the meaning of faith. In the perspective of comparative religion, this was a heroic undertaking--possible only, I would suggest, on the basis of the principle of sola fide.

The middle position between relativism and absolutism which this principle indicates was, I think, already anticipated in earlier efforts of Protestant thought. An important example might be the understanding of the Lord's Supper. Classical Protestantism rejected the "left" view of the sacrament as a purely human, symbolic commemoration. But it also rejected the understanding of the sacrament as a miracle of transubstantiation. Christ is present in the sacrament (in Lutheran language, "in, with and under" its empirical elements of bread and wine), but without a miraculous transformation of the worldly reality. It seems to me that the same understanding of the presence of God in the world--"in, with and under" its empirical elements--can be applied to the institution of the church and to the biblical text.

Such an approach to religion can, with some justice, be called relativizing. But it is well armored against that extreme of relativization that falls over into nihilism, for it

is founded on faith in God who is truth: We may not know what this truth is; we may only get glimpses of it here and there; but, in that faith, we can never give up the notion of truth.

This formulation of a core Protestant intuition comes close to what, over 60 years ago, Paul Tillich called "the Protestant principle": "Protestantism has a principle that stands beyond all its realizations. . . . The Protestant principle, in name derived from the protest of the 'protestants' against decisions of the Catholic majority, contains the divine and human protest against any absolute claim made for a relative reality, even if this claim is made by a Protestant church. The Protestant principle is the judge of every religious and cultural reality, including the religion and culture which calls itself 'Protestant.'" Tillich also calls this principle "a living, moving, restless power," which cannot be identified with any historical manifestation of the Protestant tradition, not even with the Reformation itself.

The latter point, I think, is especially important. Protestant orthodoxy, in any of its forms, has always tried to capture this "restless power" in dogmatic and ecclesial structures. These structures, not surprisingly, have frequently resembled those of Roman Catholicism, not of course in details, but precisely in their "absolute claim." Ecumenical discourse, today as well as in earlier efforts, has commonly consisted in attempting to somehow negotiate these claims. But the "living, moving, restless" spirit of the Protestant principle cannot be captured in theological formulas that can enter into such a negotiation process. This is why such exercises as the recent agreement by a group of Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians to the effect that the doctrine of justification need no longer be a cause of disunion between the two communities, despite the evident good intentions of those who participated in this exercise, seems strangely unreal. It substitutes the letter for the spirit. If one adds the fact that today, at any rate, the overwhelming majority of the members of the two communities have no idea as to what these ancient controversies were all about and have very different concerns, then the exercise strikes one like a border treaty negotiated by representatives of nonexistent nations.

The Protestant principle implies a rejection of all absolute claims, ipso facto of all offers of restored taken-for-granted certainty. It insists that the believer should live by faith alone--and that, by God's grace, this is actually possible. Kierkegaard, whatever else may be the failings of his thought, understood this point with utmost clarity.

There is one question, however, that Kierkegaard failed to answer, and perhaps never considered very seriously. Anyone with some sociological insight will ask this question with particular urgency, namely: How can one build institutions on such a fragile basis? And institutions there must be, in religion as in any other area of human life. Otherwise all beliefs and values would be purely subjective, fugitive, incapable of being transmitted from one generation to another. Thus one may want to reject the idea that outside the church there is no salvation, but surely, without a church there can be no Christian history.

But what type of institution can one speak of here? Don't viable institutions require a strong foundation of taken-for-granted verities, require representatives who exude an air of self-assured certainty? Let us assume that, over time, it is difficult to fake this. And we must ask: If one constructs institutions on the basis of the sort of skepticism that the Protestant principle implies, will these institutions not be extraordinarily weak, associations of individuals with no deep commitment? Can such institutions survive?

Well, the sociology of American religion suggests an answer: Yes, such institutions may be "weak"; the commitment of their members may be rather unreliable; but, yes, they can survive--and sometimes they show a surprising vitality.

The question about "weak" institutions is not new. Several decades ago German sociologist Helmut Schelsky wrote an influential article under the title "Can permanent reflection be institutionalized?" By "permanent reflection" he meant precisely the sort of skepticism and self-questioning that is created when the world is no longer taken for granted. Schelsky gave a qualified answer to the question of his title: Yes, such institutions are possible, indeed can be observed to exist in modern society, but they will differ from the older institutions that had been built on the foundation of taken-for-granted verities. The most important difference will be that the members of these institutions will always remember that they have chosen to belong to them and that this choice could in principle be revoked. Such institutions are, by definition, voluntary associations. The same voluntariness by which people choose to join them may at a later date allow them to leave. In this sense, these institutions are "weak." Conversely, institutions that are experienced as being an irresistible destiny are "strong."

What one must further ask, however, is the opposite of the question asked by Schelsky: How long can institutions based on an alleged certainty survive in the

pluralistic situation that constantly challenges that certainty? I think the answer must be that they too can survive--and perhaps for a long time, but with very great difficulty. The survival strategies of such "strong" institutions can be described sociologically and psychologically, but this is a topic that cannot be pursued here.

Schelsky's question pertains to any institution in modern society. It also, of course, pertains to religious communities. As far back as 1972 Dean Kelley, in his book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, outlined the traits of what he called "strong religion." These traits are a firm allegiance by the members of a "strong" church to its beliefs, to the point of risking persecution; a willingness to submit to the discipline of the church body; and an eagerness to convince others through missionary activity. Needless to say, in American Protestantism Kelley found these traits markedly present in the evangelical communities and markedly absent in the mainline churches. This contrast, he argued, explains why the former are growing and the latter are not.

In the years since the early 1970s the remarkable growth of evangelicalism and the decline of the mainline churches have given credence to Kelley's argument, even though it has been shown that the growth of evangelicalism had a lot to do with a higher birth rate among its members rather than with an influx of converts, and even though the decline in mainline Protestantism appears to have reached a plateau more recently. (One may observe in passing that an interesting bit of "anti-Kelley" data comes from the robust growth of Unitarian-Universalist churches in recent years--a community that can hardly be called "strong" in the aforementioned sense!) What is more, the research by James Hunter and others has shown that the "strength" of evangelicalism is not as durable as it seems, as younger and more educated members of those churches are subjected to the powerful influences of the wider culture.

However, let it be stipulated that churches populated by what I have called "the uncertainty-wallahs" are "weak" when compared to churches that, with whatever straining, maintain a posture of alleged certainty. Yet anyone who moves around the world of mainline Protestantism in America comes time and again upon congregations which, without any of the "strong" traits enumerated by Kelley, show remarkable vitality, not only in terms of growth (including the presence of large numbers of young people) but in terms of their members' expressed satisfaction with the spiritual comfort and nurture they derive from their participation. The studies, for example, by Nancy Ammerman and Robert Wuthnow provide empirical

evidence of this. To be sure, this is a form of religion that greatly offends those who would retain the old basis of certainty. It is much less sure of itself, often even hesitant, voluntary and therefore never to be counted upon as durable, and (probably most important) it is often the result of individual, sometimes idiosyncratic, do-it-yourself efforts.

The religious situation in Europe is very different. The culture is much more secularized, the churches (Protestant as well as Catholic) are much "weaker." Yet there too there is empirical evidence of new forms of religious expression, even new religious institutions, that resemble the "weak" American model. I would refer here to the works of Grace Davie in Britain, Danièle Hérvieu-Leger in France and Paul Zulehner in the German-speaking countries.

The thrust of these works is neatly expressed in the subtitle of Davie's book on religion in Britain since World War II: *Believing Without Belonging*. What she found (as did her colleagues in other countries of Western Europe) is that, despite the dramatic decline in church participation and expressed orthodox beliefs, a lively religious scene exists. Much of it is very loosely organized (for instance, in private gatherings of people) and has odd, do-it-yourself characteristics. For those reasons, sociologists and other observers have often failed to notice it. All the same, the presence of these phenomena casts doubt on any flat assertion to the effect that Western Europe is secular territory.

But all this is sociological talk. What about a theological view of these matters? Well, for one thing, I never quite understood why taken-for-granted religion was theologically deemed to be superior to religion by choice. On the contrary, it has long seemed to me that faith is meaningful only in a situation in which its object is not taken for granted. If I am, say, a Protestant simply by virtue of having been born into a solidly Protestant milieu, my Protestantism is no more a matter of faith than my being a Dane, a bourgeois or a person afflicted with hayfever (it is just this that Kierkegaard understood so well). But, I think, more can be said about this.

The apostle Paul can hardly be called a sociologist of religion. Yet what he says about strength and weakness in the First Letter to the Corinthians can also be applied to "strong" and "weak" churches: "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

As Christians we believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and in his glorious return. But that glory is not yet. The triumphant Christ is still coming; we are still in the aeon of the kenotic Jesus--the self-emptying Jesus, who humbles himself by taking human form. The church, while it announces the coming triumph (indeed, that is the core of its message), still bears the marks of Jesus' kenosis. Where is one to look for the presence of this kenotic Jesus? Probably not in the self-assured, triumphalist institutions that merit the appellation of "strong churches." I would think that he is more likely to be found in those "weak" places--where people are unsure of themselves, groping for a few glimpses of truth to hold onto, even where it seems that the roof is about to fall in.

There are many such places in the world today. Some are places in which Christians are a small, often persecuted minority. In other places the church exists in a wasteland of ideological collapse and secularization (the churches in Eastern Germany are a poignant case in point). Mainline American Protestantism is not a small minority, is not persecuted, and exists in a culture that is less secularized than any in the Western world. Yet its churches can surely be described as "weak" in Dean Kelley's sense. What I am suggesting here, contrary to much conventional wisdom, is that they may derive a measure of comfort from this very fact and that it is on the basis of this acceptance that they might rethink their mission in American society.