

Religious Fanatic Subjects in the Postmodernism Era: the Meta-Theory of the Sociology of Religion Peter L. Berger



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Abstract

The tendency of every adherent of a religion or a sect of belief, it acknowledged or not, is fanaticism. It seems that there is not a single believer who will say that his religion is worse than any other religion. Every adherent of a religion will tend to defend their respective religions. Even if there is a difference, it only lies in the level of moderation; one is more open, while the other is more closed. In the book *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Berger seeks to understand how religious belief is shaped at the individual and social levels. Furthermore, he wants to say, of course, latently, that religion is like a shell or canopy, which makes its adherents feel safe but at the same time, it is difficult to see other values that exist outside the spectrum of values of the truth of their religion. The nature of the religious belief system creates perspective restrictions and ideological tendencies. Berger's thoughts on the sociology of religion are still relevant today, especially in the context of a pluralistic Indonesian society in the context of caring for diversity. This research method is qualitative, with literacy study techniques that refer to Berger's works, as well as through literacy studies of other relevant writings. The results of this research are expected to enrich theoretical studies for sociology scholars, especially those interested in the sociology of religion.

Introduction

Socially, religion can be considered as an institution or institution that has administrative and legal–formal characteristics. In Indonesia itself, the freedom to embrace each religion is even constitutively protected by the Constitution. Socio–religious institutions function not only to record individuals who are registered as members of that religion but also to regulate norms, values, and a system of morality, up to ritual or worship procedures that are permitted according to the teachings of each religion (O'Dea 1994). This religious institution forms the framework of a belief system so that its adherents are expected to be able to carry out religious obligations in accordance with the rules, values, and procedures that have been determined in accordance with the teachings of the religion (Mudzakir 2014).

According to Berger, the framework of the belief system in the context of religion as a social institution is not generated as something *given* from above the sky. In essence, all of that is formed or created socially through a process of individual subjective meaning, which in turn is transformed as an objective reality and acts back on the individual adherents of the religion itself (Berger 1990a). So in Berger's dictionary, there is a kind of dynamic dialectic between individual subjectivization processes and social objectivation processes over time, which play a role in shaping and changing a system of belief frameworks, both revolutionary and evolutionary. Unfortunately, over time, most individual adherents of religion fail or are no longer able to recognize such dialectical processes that they are actually the creators of religious institutions. Significantly, when religion itself, through the role of its religious leaders, cultivates itself as an objective reality that is holy and cannot be criticized. In this process, religion then seeks to escape from its essence as a humane product and then 'fly to the holy sky'. Individuals then consider religion as a reality far greater or transcendent than itself, which can authoritatively impose obedience and sacrifice



(Berger 1991). In the extreme condition, if this kind of precondition has been achieved, individual adherents can even be willing to do anything to defend their religion to the death, as a manifest struggle for 'truth', which is legitimized by supernatural divine doctrines (Sen 2007).

Especially on a national scale in the context of Indonesia's plural society, religious fundamentalism movements that lead to extremism can clearly threaten diversity (Hardiman 2013). In a society that prioritizes diversity, such as Indonesia, the notion of religious superiority is not allowed in the slightest, namely that one religion is better than another. Every religion is seen as equal before the Constitution. But in practice, there are always, both individually and in groups, who make unilateral claims that their religion or belief is correct. Supposedly, the concepts of religious truth need to be placed relatively according to the context of the belief system of each religion itself. In Indonesian society, what is needed is not an effort to justify but an attitude of tolerance between religious communities or adherents of beliefs. Religion cannot go any further to enter the public sphere, not only because the majority versus minority dichotomy is not accepted, but because each religion has a unique belief system framework so that in general, it cannot be widely accepted by a pluralistic public. The reasons beyond that, of course, are just political rhetoric (Hardiman 2013).

In this regard, a meta-theoretical analysis of the sociology of religion by Peter L. Berger is very relevant to study, especially for sociologists in Indonesia. Through Berger, we will not only study how a belief system framework is formed and keeps on changing but also that each religion has an ideological tendency to legitimize its belief system as the most correct. This condition produces religious fanatic subjects.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a literature literacy study technique on *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, relevant books, and journals. In addition, case examples are also added to explain the relevance of Berger's thoughts in the context of contemporary Indonesian society. This is expected to open a more comprehensive discussion of religious phenomena in contemporary society through a sociological approach (Raho 2003).

Peter L. Berger's Sociological Perspective on Religion

Peter Ludwig Berger was born on March 17, 1929 in Vienna, Austria, and died on June 27, 2017 (88 years). Berger originally grew up in Austria, but soon after the end of World War II, he migrated to the United States. Berger earned his Bachelor of Arts degree at Wagner College in 1949, then continued his studies at the New School for Social Research in New York and earned his doctorate in 1952. Berger had long been interested in cultural and religious dynamics. Therefore in 1955, he applied to work at the Evangelische Akademie in Bad Boll, Germany. His career took off quite quickly because his thoughts opened up new approaches to sociology and theology. In 1956, he was immediately promoted to associate professor at the University of North Carolina, and in 1958 became an associate professor at Hartford Theological Seminary. In addition, Berger also earned professorships at the New School for Social Research, Rutgers University, and Boston University. Berger has spent most of his time teaching at The New School for Social Research, Rutgers University, and Boston University. In addition, Berger has also served as Director at the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture (Samuel 2012).

Berger is well known for his many contributions to the academic world of sociology, especially in the sub-fields of the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of

religion. He is also interested in conducting many studies on modernity, especially regarding development and social change in the post–World War II era. Among his famous works, one of them is a book entitled *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York, 1966), which he co–wrote with his friend, Thomas Luckmann. This book has played many roles in the development of the sociology of knowledge in that era, especially in the interpretive sociology approach that explores social constructionism. Through this book, Berger and Luckmann attempt to propose a theory regarding how individuals and communal/ society construct their social reality in a specific and dynamic manner (Dharma 2023). For him, every society, including individuals who are part of that society, always has a unique view of the world. This view is not stable, it is formed and forms social reality, so it is relative (Berger 1990b). Every society always produces its own system of knowledge and values. This book later became a masterpiece for Berger and received appreciation from the International Sociological Association as one of the most influential books in the scientific field of sociology.

Besides the book, other works that are considered successful are books *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Social Theory of Religion* which was published in 1967. This book is a theoretical application of previous books used by Berger to explain religious phenomena, especially regarding the formation of a framework for religious belief systems. In this book, Berger explains very well and systematically the relationship between individuals and society, subjective reality and objective reality, which are dialectical in the formation of religious beliefs. For him, it was very clear from the start that religious reality is part of social reality (Berger 1990b). Therefore, as a social reality, the reality of religion needs to be studied rationally and understood as a cultural product of the society that has human characteristics. Religion was created by humans as an attempt to institutionalize a certain belief system, through social processes which he put forward through externalization – objectivation – internalization schemes with the medium of reification and socialization. In this way, he wants to say that religious institutions are a product of society. This work substantially contributes greatly to the development of the study of the sociology of religion to this day, as well as being one of the most widely used theories as a reference for solving various kinds of religious phenomena by sociologists in all parts of the world.

Also, through this book, he implicitly tries to challenge the opinion of most sociologists who predict that religion will become extinct in the 21st century: religion – based countries and democratic countries. Berger's conviction proved correct, so as we all have witnessed to this day, a number of countries based on religion are still standing firm, and a number of democratic countries, such as Indonesia, constitutively do not recognize secularization. On another occasion, Berger actually provided many facts about the opposite trend, namely the symptoms of revivalism or religious awakening. Thus he succeeded in annulling the opinions of his colleagues because in fact, religion is not only still widely practiced, but in many cases, it is practiced with great enthusiasm, even more than in the past, and is lived in a new way according to the context of the times. In fact, this trend of revivalism does not only occur in one particular religion or belief system but occurs in many religions and belief systems in various groups of people.

Religion as an Element of Social Reality

To understand the position of religion in social reality, we first need to understand human philosophy based on Berger's terminology in the book *The Sacred Canopy*:

Elements of a Social Theory of Religion. Humans are, by nature, first of all the threat of a state of madness or chaos (*anomie*). Anomie is a situation where there is no single value framework that can be used to interpret part or all of the life experiences, including interpreting the reality of the place where one lives in the everyday world (Berger 1990b). This happens because humans are basically organisms that have different characteristics from animals. In animals, almost all or part of the reflex to nature is driven by instinct or instincts. The animal world is formed mechanically by innate instinctual stimuli, so animals cannot possibly have a level of conscious ability like humans. Contrary to that, physiologically, his body's reflexes are determined very little by innate instincts. The human world is subjectively not formed mechanically in the brain as a nervous stimulus. Therefore, driven by their intellectual abilities, humans have the need and need to independently interpret, define, and structure their world, both individually and collectively, so that conformity and order occur in the world of meaning. The orderly meaning will make the human world feel at home to live. In short, humans are faced with a world of meaning that has not been formed by itself, so socially, he needs to form a world of meaning together in an effort to defend themselves from the threat of madness or chaos (*anomie*) (Berger 1990b)

According to Berger, the mechanism for compiling the reality of meaning is carried out in three stages which continuously interact dialectically. The first stage is referred to as stage *externalization* (Berger 1990b). At this stage, both humans, as individuals and as a group, try to give a name, definition, and meaning to their environment, as well as to the series of their life experiences. Externalization is a uniquely human situation as a way of being (*human being*) and actively relates to the world around him, and in this way, he affirms his existence in the world. Humans shape and change their environment, creating meaningful interactions or relationships with other people in the reality they live in. This series of efforts actually has one goal, namely to create order and stability; a common perception of the world as a subjective reality. The similarity of perception as a subjective reality produces bonds or threads of shared meaning, which make an individual feel connected to other individuals and to the reality he lives in together. He is no longer just a creator of reality but now also feels that he 'owns' reality. Now he will feel alive in the reality of a world that seems permanent, which makes him feel at home, safe, and orderly. Even if this kind of perception was just an illusion of desire, he had created himself (Fromm 2011).

The second stage after externalization is *objectivation* (Berger 1990b). Objectivation refers to the culmination of the externalization of individual activities, which then form values, norms, rules, institutions, and so on. Objectivation is a human product that escapes from its creator, who in turn is confronted with it *peer to peer* with the individual creators. Following Marx, this situation is underlined by Berger as *reification*. Reification contains the experience of alienation (*alienation*), because now the individual can no longer personally recognize, control, or own the object he personally created because the object now has a position or status of greater autonomy than the individuals themselves. The created product then externally stands as an objective reality that is maintained and owned together. Such an objective reality can force individuals to submit and obey voluntarily if they get authoritative legitimacy. This kind of legitimacy means giving a kind of power status to the object. As a result of consensus, it is recognized and needs to be obeyed. The degree can also be different, meaning that it contains different powers of coercion. For example, the levels between customary rules/laws, religious laws, state constitutions, laws, etc. This includes the

types of institutions in charge of organizing and guaranteeing that objective reality still has supremacy, for example, traditional institutions, religious mass organizations, state government, etc. Thus, any violations or inappropriate actions taken by individuals may be subject to sanctions. For example, individuals who violate the law can be tried and imprisoned by the state, or individuals who commit immoral sins by religion will be subject to the argument that they will be sent to hell.

The third stage after externalization and objectivation is *internalisation* (Berger 1990b). Internalization refers to efforts to preserve objective reality that has been socially constructed. Preservation in question is an effort so that individuals as members of society, including the next generation of the community concerned, participate in caring for that objective reality. For example, the state every Monday holds a flag ceremony for students through the school administration. Another example is that parents often take their children to places of worship to carry out religious rituals. The goal is that members of society from an early age incorporate objective reality into their respective subjective consciousness. In this way, the objective reality faced by individuals finds equivalence or symmetries in their subjective reality. Berger explains the importance of the role of *socialization* as a medium for internalizing objective reality into subjective reality. Socialization is not only seen as an effort to transfer information about reality but also as an effort so that all members of society can adapt to the standard patterns expected by their social reality (Mawikere 2023). The most important agents of socialization are family and school because these two social agents are the first places where individuals grow and know their social reality.

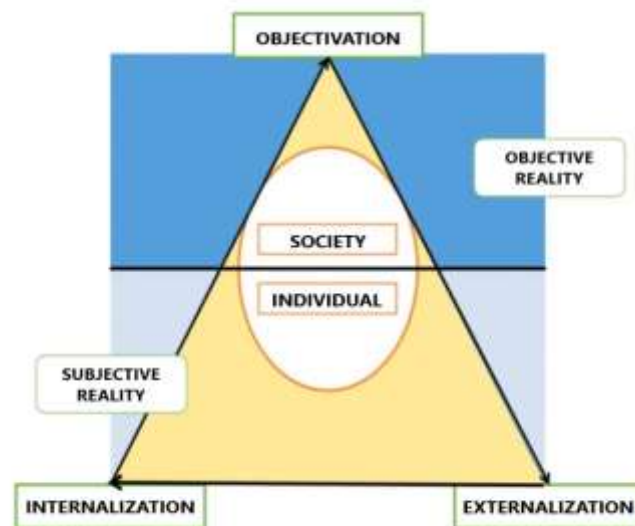


Figure 1. The Formation of Social Reality

The picture above seems to simplify the social processes that occur in the context of the formation of social reality, even though in reality the social processes that occur are far more complex. There is a dialectical relationship, forming one another, influencing one another, changing one another between individuals and society, between subjective reality and objective reality, through the framework of externalization – objectivation – internalization. When individuals change, society changes with them. When society changes, individuals change too (Nurkhalis 2023). Social reality is never steady and is fragile. Social reality is also plural and relative, meaning that every society always has its own social reality. People who live in the civilization of the Western World must have many different ways of life and

perspectives from people who live in the civilization of the East World. Rural communities have a different ethos from urban communities. The relationship between social realities is not passive but interactive, changing each other and often colliding.

Every social reality is composed of complex relationships between institutions. Without the intention of trying to belittle, the fact is that social religion is only one of the institutions in addition to various other institutions, such as family institutions, educational institutions, political institutions, economic institutions, legal institutions, and other institutions. The position of religious institutions in social reality, according to Berger's terminology, is very clear as a result of social objectivation. Religion is an objective reality for its adherents, for example the Vatican Church in front of Catholics, Nahdlatul Ulama, or Muhammadiyah organizations in front of their members, and so on. Religion provides the institutional structure of the organization; membership administration, management, religious leaders, belief systems, morality, and rituals.

Unlike other social institutions, religion has a unique way of legitimizing itself. Religion legitimizes through cosmological strategies, which generally have transcendental characteristics; supernatural, supra-human, supernatural (Berger 1990b). Religions cult themselves using many cosmological symbols, such as god, gods, angels, devils, afterlife, nirvana, hell, and so on. In this way, religion forms a picture of the perception of another world dimension that is different from the dimension of human life. The cosmological dimension builds devices, dynamics, and sacredness that are different from the dimensions of the human world. Berger refers to it as *nomos* or orderly arrangement of the world of meaning (Berger 1990b). *Nomos* 'life above the heavens' (macro-cosmos) is considered eternal and holy, and is often contrasted with 'life on earth' (micro-cosmos) which is mortal and anathema. Even though the dimensions between the two are different, there are times when these dimensions touch each other. For example, the occurrence of a natural disaster tragedy is considered form of anger or divine punishment due to disobedient human behavior. Through this strategy of cosmological legitimacy, religion is able to make itself appear to have a higher position than other institutions; religion is able to legitimize itself as a representation of the cosmos in human reality. Religious institutions make it seem as if their existence is higher than other social institutions. Such a doctrine can result in the emergence of individual perceptions, in subjective reality, that loyalty to religion must be more important than loyalty, for example, to the motherland or country. The state is considered mortal, while defending religion is a form of holiness.

More than that, the greatest achievement of the legitimacy of religious cosmology is its ability to stabilize or establish a social reality that is actually fragile and relative. In the Middle Ages, for example, the king was considered God's representative on earth, so obedience to the king was the same as obedience to God. Another example corruption results in structural poverty experienced by a certain society, but religious theorem says that the fate that a person experiences is a trial given by God to test the firmness of faith. Socially, religion has the function of maintaining or preserving the situation of social reality (Berger 1990b). Through this strategy, religion makes it appear that social reality, which is actually fragile becomes permanent, stable, and *given*. Religion provides a cosmological definition of reality, thereby making a relative reality far more spiritually meaningful. Such a role of religion seems to be able to answer the main psychological needs of humans who are thirsty for stability and a sense of security, keeping them away from the threat of anomie, which can cause chaos and symptoms of madness.

The main problem of religion, starting from this point, causes individuals to become more at home with the reality they live in, but at the same time, they become more sensitive to threats of change and the presence of other realities that intersect with their own social reality (Adnan 2021). As a result, individuals who attach too much to their religion seem to live in a shell or canopy, which on the one hand, provides a sense of security about meaning, but on the one hand, it is difficult to be tolerant of other realities that are more or less different from their own. This clearly results in a limited perspective on the world, so that individuals are unable to see other perspectives that exist outside of their own so far. Acceptance of other social realities or other systems of meaning will result in shocks to the structure of the meaning of social reality. Such acceptance has the potential to relativize the established status of its reality. The order of reality that so far has been taken for granted by him could have been destroyed, entering a phase of confusion of meaning, if he had allowed himself to more openly accept the presence of other social realities. Therefore, the tendency of religious subjects is always fanatical. Fanaticism appears as a response or response to maintain the whole system of meaning that has been believed and held seriously. "My religion is definitely better than other people's religions."

The Emergence of Religious Fanatical Subjects

The term postmodernism first appeared when it was used by John Watkins Chapman in the 1880s, referring to a school of art (painting) that would become known as the "Postmodern painting style" describing a way of deviating from French Impressionism. Slowly the understanding of the term postmodernism is not only limited in the scope of art, which J. M. Thompson said in his 1914 article at *The Hibbert Journal*, is used to describe changes in attitudes and beliefs in criticism of religion. Postmodernism describes the broad and comprehensive era and movement of the 20th century, occurring in all objects of study and study, from philosophy, art, and architecture to incarnated as a critique to move away from the confines of modernist concepts, perspectives, or lines of thought. Broadly speaking, postmodernism is the rejection or resistance to the foundation of thinking that is all logical and rational, which is often unanimously based on logic that originates from the power of reason to affirm everything in all concepts and fields (Lash 1990). Meanwhile, everything that is based on logical reasoning necessitates the construction of thought to produce knowledge, which then encourages people to dive deeper into factual reality for the purpose of discovering laws and principles that are essential and universal. Unfortunately, modern understanding, which is completely based on logic and rationality, instead leads humans to totalitarian actions and creates inhumane mechanisms (O'Donnell 2009).

Social change that is so rapid, complex, dynamic, and paradoxical presents a feeling of anxiety that is felt clearly in the latter half of the twentieth century. This condition is caused not only by global economic instability but simultaneously due to political shocks, the collapse of ties of social and cultural life, and the obsolescence of values and morals offered by religion, which at the same time occurs a massive wave of transformation from conventional to digital life. This social change is so shocking, giving rise to the potential for anomie; where old values begin to collapse and are considered irrelevant, but new values that can be used as a steady guideline have not yet been formed. This situation causes individuals to relativize the values they previously held and considered correct, which resulted in fragmentation in society. Society is becoming increasingly *liquid society*, split, forming an ultra-liberal

perspective, where each individual prefers to live in his own subjective reality rather than recognizing and trying to care for objective reality in the life of his people. This symptom of postmodernism occurs in almost all countries in any part of the world today. "My truth is not your truth, your truth is not my truth." There are no longer any limits and standards for the classification of values and morals that are maintained in people's lives. Social bonds fade as a result of the destruction of the construction of the objective meaning of society.

When the development rhythm of the liberal era progressed so rapidly, supported by its dependence on science and technology, but at the same time, there was a rejection of divine existence and religious dogmatism. Psychologically presenting forms of anxiety to answer the need for meaning and purpose in life. Meanwhile, the existing values offered by the modern world are considered to have failed to answer this kind of need. A number of fragile individuals seek to search and rediscover traditional values; he finds the answer to this kind of psychological need in religion. Religious doctrines offer propositions about the meaning and purpose of life that are eternal, sublime, stable, and permanent with cosmological legitimacy (Berger 1990b). They find a sense of security and shade under the canopy of religion, avoid themselves from the threat of anomie. Religious revivalism in the reality of postmodern society presumably originates from situations like this, namely as an effort to find strength in facing fragility due to the collapse of objective values and the fragmentation of values in the secular world, which are considered to be mortal and hedonic.

People in the modern world are again yearning for the existence of an absolute figure (god, gods, etc.) to whom individuals can surrender their anxieties. Within various cult groups (religious beliefs or streams of belief), they collectively construct objects of this kind; the projection of an imaginary object that is a sublimation of human longing for a permanent truth value, as well as a pedestal for devoting and giving meaning to all events rather than experienced life experiences. Apart from being the result of individual failure in reasoning about various alternative values in the secular world, religious revivalism is also present to answer the dryness of the meaning of life in the modern world. Religion exists as a social oasis, an entity that is a coolant in the arid desert of modern life filled with corruption, conflict, and chaos. In another matter, scientism which relies on rationalism, not only fails to satisfy human spiritual needs but also cannot replace the social role of religion (Zain 2005).

The problem of religion in the postmodern world does not stop there. In fact, the increasingly complex modern world can no longer be interpreted through terminology dictionaries of existing religious teachings or beliefs. These teachings are considered obsolete and no longer relevant to the modern world. Then, efforts emerged to redefine the teaching in a new and contextual way, which has led to the formation of new religious sub-denominations, new cult groups, new streams of belief, which may often be considered to deviate from existing religious teachings (Riza 2022). The objective reality of religion often experiences fragmentation within their own group, which results in differentiation and pluralism of viewpoints of belief. For example, Protestant Christianity in Indonesia has many sub-denominations, or Islam, which has various schools of thought. This plurality is due to the differences in perceptions, perspectives, approaches, and interpretations which are basically faced with changes in the reality of the modern world in order to answer a number of challenges. This kind of religious fragmentation phenomenon occurs simultaneously and massively in almost all parts of the world.

Religious fragmentation groups tend to be fundamental, prone to slipping into narrow fanaticism, claiming that the teachings of their religious group are the most correct, even if the claim is made to other groups within the same religious sphere. Moreover, in some groups, the fanatical sub-denominational often has an aggressive streak. They insist that the group's subjective values be accepted as a broader objective reality. This kind of aggression can be carried out both latently and subtly, but it can also be destructive (using violence). The Fragmentation of religious groups or beliefs in postmodern reality occurs more massively in line with the openness of the information era. The flow of information provided by various digital platforms hit so hard, encouraging individuals to find sources of reference and new figures who are considered capable of articulating the fulfillment of their needs for the desire for meaning.

Aggression and militancy towards religious sub-denominational groups are quite vulnerable to being politicized or twisted for certain interests. In Indonesia after the Reformation in '98, Indonesia entered a new phase of national and state life. The collapse of the New Order dictatorship system opened the horizons for the practice of a more democratic socio-political life. Open elections are held every five years, involving many parties, many legislative candidates, as well as executive candidates. Such a political system requires political parties, legislative candidates, and executive candidates to compete for the votes of the voters. In a number of cases, unhealthy campaigns took place in the form of identity politics. Identity politics is played to gain the sympathy of constituents so that potential voters feel that the prospective leader is articulating and representing their aspirations and interests. Identity politics is carried out by toying with the subjective reality meaning system of individuals regarding their beliefs, which have actually been politically manipulated. Religious beliefs mixed with political interests will lead to narrow fanaticism, opening opportunities for social friction to occur under the pretext of the struggle for religious truth. The election for the Governor of DKI Jakarta in 2017 is one of the most brutal examples in Indonesia's history of the harsh effects of identity politics.

Expressions of religious fanaticism can also appear in public spaces in postmodern realities in the form of efforts to dominate regulations or public policies (Hardiman 2013). This is done by transmitting a subjective reality of a certain religious group or belief into an objective reality that must be accepted by all religious groups or other beliefs that exist in that society. The application of Islamic Sharia law to an area where the characteristics of the community consist of various other religious groups in Indonesia (Rohmawati 2021). The purpose of all this is not only to carry out uniformity of values and perspectives on the objective reality of the people but also as an expression that states the existence, superiority, and superiority of these fanatical religious groups.

Conclusion

Religion is part of social reality. It is present in social reality along with other institutions. What distinguishes religion from other social institutions is its ability to legitimize its own social institutions and reality through a cosmological strategy. With such a strategy, religion makes itself visible in a sublime and permanent way. The subject of religious fanaticism in the postmodern world was born as a result of the fragmentation of the objective reality of society and the ever-widening wave of secularization. Religious fanatic subjects try to find a sense of security and stability of meaning through religion in the midst of the uncertainty of the world's objective meaning of society. Religion can be a kind of shell or canopy from the confusion of

meaning in the outside world that prevents the subject from the possibility of anomie. Unfortunately, this kind of religious fanaticism simultaneously hinders or limits the subject's ability to see the world from a much broader and moderate perspective.

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