



Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

A Critical Review of Peter L. Berger's Approach to Religion

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Abstract

This article presents a critical and integrative review of Peter L. Berger's approach to religion across his sociological and theological corpus. It reconstructs Berger's central conceptual framework, grounded in Alfred Schutz's social phenomenology and the sociology of knowledge, and demonstrates how it mediates the classic Weber–Durkheim divide through the dialectic of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. The analysis then turns to Berger's substantive definition of religion as cosmos construction in a sacred mode, his account of the anthropological foundations of religion in the lifeworld and in human biological "incompleteness," and his distinctive thesis that religion operates as a plausibility-conferring "sacred canopy." The second part of the article traces Berger's evolving interpretation of modernization: from his early endorsement of the secularization thesis, through his decisive turn toward the theory of desecularization, to his later emphasis on pluralism as the inescapable religious condition of modernity. The discussion further evaluates Berger's proposed theological strategies, i.e. deductive, reductive, and inductive, emphasizing his preference for an inductive, experience-centered method in plural contexts, while critically addressing unresolved issues such as the criteria for authentic religious experience, the risks of relativism, and the tensions between experiential theology and confessional exclusivism. The article concludes that Berger's thought remains indispensable for understanding the dynamics of religion under modern conditions: secularization appears as a contingent rather than universal process, pluralism emerges as a structural feature of modernity, and belief increasingly assumes the form of reflexive choice rather than inherited certainty.

Keywords: Peter L. Berger; Sociology of Religion; Sacred Canopy; Secularization; Pluralism.

Introduction

Few twentieth-century scholars shaped the vocabulary of the sociology of religion as decisively as Peter L. Berger. Trained in both sociology and theology, Berger wrote with unusual clarity and intellectual range, synthesizing Weberian interpretive sociology, Durkheimian attention to social facts, and Schutz's phenomenology of the lifeworld. His collaboration with Thomas Luckmann produced "The Social Construction of Reality" (1966), a foundational text in the sociology of knowledge; "The Sacred Canopy" (1967) introduced a lasting metaphor for religion's world-making power; and "A Rumor of Angels" (1970) together with "The Heretical Imperative" (1979) examined the fate of transcendence and belief under modern conditions. This article reconstructs and critically appraises Berger's approach to religion. The aim is twofold: first, to present a coherent map of Berger's key concepts, i.e. his definition of religion, its origins, functions, and its relationship to modernity; and second, to evaluate the strengths and limitations of his proposals, particularly his later revisions to the secularization thesis and his advocacy of an inductive theology suited to plural societies. Beyond its theoretical contribution, such an appraisal is especially relevant to contexts like contemporary Iran and broader West Asia, where debates on modernization, public religion, pluralism, and the meaning of faith in media-urban settings remain pressing. The discussion proceeds in six steps: (1) methodological background; (2) religion as phenomenon and Berger's substantive definition; (3) the origin of religion in the lifeworld; (4) the functions of religion as legitimation and canopy; (5) modernization, secularization, and pluralism; and (6) a critical appraisal followed by concluding reflections.

Methodological Background

Berger's project is best understood as a strand within the sociology of knowledge, as an inquiry into how human meanings are produced, stabilized, and transmitted through social processes (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Two intellectual sources are decisive in shaping this framework. First, following Max Weber, Berger adopts an interpretive orientation (*Verstehen*), whereby the sociologist seeks to comprehend the meanings that actors attribute to their actions and institutions. This entails adherence to what Weber termed "value freedom," namely the bracketing of the researcher's own normative or theological commitments to ensure that sociological analysis does not collapse into advocacy or confession. Second, drawing on Alfred Schutz, Berger incorporates a phenomenology of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), the taken-for-granted realm of everyday interaction in which typifications, routines, and common-sense knowledge constitute the shared fabric of reality.

The central mechanism of Berger's synthesis is his threefold dialectic: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Through externalization, humans project meanings into the world by way of action and institution-building. Through objectivation, these projections crystallize into seemingly independent structures, i.e. laws, roles, symbols, and traditions. Through internalization, individuals are socialized into these structures, which in turn shape their identities. In Berger's concise formulation: society is a human product; society becomes an objective reality; and humans are themselves social products (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This dynamic allows Berger to mediate between Weber's concern for subjective meaning and Durkheim's emphasis on the coercive power of social institutions.

Methodologically, when Berger turns to religion, he supplements this framework with what he calls "methodological atheism." The sociologist, he insists, should not adjudicate the truth of transcendental claims but rather analyze their human dimension, i.e. the symbols, institutions, practices, and legitimations through which religious meaning is socially constructed. This is not a metaphysical denial of transcendence but an analytic discipline designed to safeguard the empirical integrity of sociological inquiry.

Religion as Phenomenon

Berger maintains that sociological inquiry requires a clear and operational definition of religion. He rejects crude reductionisms, such as interpreting religion merely as pathology, illusion, or ideology, that dissolve the phenomenon into categories of non-religion. Equally, he cautions against purely functional definitions that classify any totalizing system of meaning or loyalty as "religion," thereby stripping the term of its distinctive analytical content. His own approach is substantive: religion is world-building in a sacred mode. The decisive differentiator is the sacred, that which signifies "more than" ordinary meaning, experienced as an order that is radically other and normatively binding. In his early writings, Berger used "the sacred" and "the supernatural" interchangeably; later, he distinguished between them and eventually represented their relationship as overlapping circles: the properly religious domain is where experiences are both sacred and supernatural.

Drawing on Schutz, Berger conceives religious experience as a movement into a finite province of meaning, a sphere that temporarily suspends the paramount reality of everyday life. Within this altered horizon, the self encounters a dimension of reality that reorients identity through what Rudolf Otto described as a numinous ambivalence of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, simultaneous awe and attraction (Otto 1958). Yet, as

Berger notes, such ecstatic experiences inevitably fade. To sustain them, religion requires mediations:

1. Experience: the first-order encounter with the sacred;
2. Tradition: the institutions, narratives, and rites that “objectify” the sacred within collective memory; and
3. Thought: theologies and philosophies that legitimate the tradition once its taken-for-granted status erodes.

The result is a coherent analytic program: define religion substantively; describe religious experience phenomenologically; trace its institutional mediations; and preserve an interpretive, value-suspending, and methodologically atheistic stance throughout sociological analysis.

The Origin of Religion

Why is there religion? Berger’s answer is both anthropological and social. Human beings, unlike most animals, are biologically “unfinished”: our instincts are under-specified, and our behavior is not determined by fixed genetic programming. We survive by constructing a stable world of meaning and order, what Berger, following Durkheim, calls *nomos*. Through externalization, we project meanings into the world; through objectivation, these meanings crystallize into institutions and symbolic systems; and through internalization, they become part of personal identity (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Yet humanly constructed worlds are inherently fragile. *Marginal situations*, especially suffering, death, and existential crisis, threaten to dissolve the coherence of meaning. Religion responds by extending the human *nomos* into a cosmic one: a sacred canopy under which the social world appears grounded in ultimate reality (Berger 1967). Institutions now mirror cosmic law; biographies are inscribed within trans-individual narratives; and chaos is tamed through theodicies that render misfortune meaningful and sustain hope. In this sense, religion represents humanity’s boldest strategy of meaning-making: it secures the social world against ultimate threats by sacralizing it.

This account does not imply that religion is a “mere” projection or illusion. Methodologically, the sociologist suspends judgment as to whether religion corresponds to an actual metaphysical order. Substantively, Berger allows that religious claims may indeed be true; he simply maintains that questions of truth belong to theology, not sociology.

The Functions of Religion

Berger analyzes religion's social consequences without presupposing its truth or falsity. Three primary functions are central to his account.

1. **Social Structuration:** Religion patterns and legitimates the architecture of social life, its statuses, roles, and boundaries, by embedding them within a cosmic frame. Classic examples include cosmogonies that ground political authority or kinship in primordial divine acts.
2. **Social Control:** By sacralizing norms and institutions, religion reinforces compliance, so that moral injunctions acquire divine authority, rulers act under divine mandate, and extraordinary commitment can be mobilized in times of crisis.
3. **Symbolic Integration:** Religion integrates disparate experiences, including marginal and threatening ones, into a coherent and meaningful whole. This is the “sacred canopy” in operation: a symbolic universe stretched over institutions and biographies that renders life ultimately plausible (Berger 1967).

Legitimation operates on several levels, from proverbial wisdom and moral codes to comprehensive symbolic systems. Its effectiveness depends on the interiorization of these legitimations through processes of socialization. What Berger calls “mystification,” as the masking of the human origins of institutions, is not necessarily a form of deceit; rather, it is the very mechanism through which meanings acquire an extra-human weight, commanding allegiance and enabling individuals to endure suffering with a sense of purpose.

Theological Landscape under Modern Conditions

1. *Modernization as Situation*

For Berger, modernity is not merely a historical period but a *situation*—a distinctive configuration of institutions and consciousness. Industrial production, technological rationality, bureaucratic organization, and mass mediation collectively generate a characteristic *modern consciousness*: future-oriented, governed by instrumental reason, marked by individualization, and accompanied by a progressive loosening of traditional plausibility structures. Modernization thus signifies both an institutional transformation and a corresponding reshaping of subjectivity.

2. *Early Secularization Thesis*

During the 1960s and 1970s, Berger maintained that modernization inevitably entailed secularization. As societies modernize, religion withdraws first from the public sphere (*objective secularization*) and subsequently from individual consciousness (*subjective secularization*), becoming increasingly privatized and optional (Berger 1967; 1970). For Berger, belief continues to exist, yet as a matter of personal preference rather than as a taken-for-granted certainty. Religion, once embedded in the fabric of social institutions, is displaced into the sphere of private choice.

3. *The Turn to Desecularization*

By the 1980s and 1990s, empirical realities forced Berger to revise his position. Contrary to expectations of a universal religious decline, the world witnessed vigorous religious revivals: the Islamic resurgence, the rapid expansion of evangelical and Pentecostal movements across the Global South and East Asia, and widespread religious renewal in post-Communist societies. Berger conceded that “the world is as furiously religious as ever,” with two significant exceptions: much of Western Europe and a thin, transnational “international intellectual subculture” (Berger 2002). Secularization, he now argued, is not a universal process but a regional and historically contingent one.

4. *Pluralism as the True Correlate of Modernity*

The more enduring and universal correlate of modernity, Berger contends, is pluralism. Urbanization, education, social mobility, and mass media produce an unprecedented proliferation of worldviews. Under conditions of pluralism, no single tradition enjoys automatic plausibility; faith becomes an exercise in reflexive choice. Religious monopolies yield to competitive “markets” of belief; persuasion replaces coercion; and religious institutions increasingly adopt rationalized and bureaucratic forms to sustain participation. Doctrines adapt to audience expectations, and belief itself undergoes subjectivization, shifting from inherited conviction to consciously chosen preference (Berger 1979).

Pluralism erodes certainty but does not necessarily engender unbelief. On the contrary, it may stimulate religious creativity, innovation, and the emergence of hybrid forms of faith. Berger’s late synthesis is succinct and influential: modernization does not abolish religion; rather, it reconfigures its social location. Secularization is contingent; and, pluralism is structural.

Three Theological Strategies

In “The Heretical Imperative” (1979), Berger outlines three theological strategies available to faith in a secular and plural age: deductive, reductive, and inductive. Each represents a distinct way of negotiating revelation, tradition, and modern consciousness.

- **Deductive (Barthian):** This approach begins from revelation and seeks to reinforce the authority of tradition. Its strength lies in doctrinal clarity and fidelity to confessional sources; its risk is the loss of plausibility within publics skeptical of external or heteronomous authority.
- **Reductive (Bultmannian):** This strategy translates the language of tradition into the categories of modern consciousness, demythologizing religious symbols to render them existentially intelligible. Its advantage is accessibility and relevance; its danger is the evacuation of transcendence, reducing theology to a form of secular humanism.
- **Inductive (Schleiermacherian):** This approach begins from human experience, i.e. everyday life and what Berger calls signals of transcendence such as order, play, hope, humor, and guilt, and interprets these phenomena as pointers toward God. Its strength is dialogical plausibility within pluralistic publics; its vulnerabilities include uncertain criteria for authentic experience, the risk of relativism, and tension with confessional exclusivism.

For the conditions of late modernity, Berger favors the inductive strategy. It respects the experiential starting point of modern agents while still leaving interpretive space for transcendence. Theological reflection, in this mode, becomes a hermeneutical venture that engages human experience as both locus and medium of revelation.

Religious Pluralism

Pluralism, for Berger, dissolves religious monopolies and introduces market-like dynamics into the religious field. Denominations and movements compete for adherents; doctrinal and ritual “products” are adapted to shifting constituencies; and ecumenical “cartels” may emerge to stabilize the competitive environment. Bureaucratic rationalization, manifest in practices of fundraising, public relations, and quantitative metrics, becomes widespread. The sources of financial support also matter: state funding fosters political bureaucracies, whereas voluntary contributions encourage economic bureaucracies, each shaping the structure and strategy of religious institutions.

More profoundly, pluralism relocates religion within consciousness. When social confirmation fragments, belief loses its automatic self-evidence. Faith becomes a matter of choice, and indeed of continuous choosing. Berger names this the normalization of “heresy” (from Ancient Greek *haíresis*, “to choose”). The condition is existentially ambivalent: freedom expands as certainty contracts. The believer now carries faith more deliberately, but also more precariously.

Critical Appraisal

Strengths

1. **Durkheim–Weber Bridge:** Berger’s dialectical model of externalization–objectivation–internalization remains a powerful bridge between meaning-oriented and structure-oriented sociology. It avoids circular explanations, such as “religion exists because society needs cohesion,” by grounding religion in the lifeworld before tracing its social and institutional effects (Berger and Luckmann 1966).
2. **Substantive Clarity:** By distinguishing between sacred–supernatural religion and secular “quasi-religions,” Berger preserves analytical precision and prevents the conceptual sprawl that results when “everything becomes religion.”
3. **Methodological Discipline:** Berger’s integration of interpretive analysis, value-suspension, and methodological atheism enables a balanced description of religion, neither devotional nor debunking. It exemplifies a methodological posture that allows for empathetic understanding without collapsing into theological advocacy or reductionist critique.
4. **Empirical Responsiveness:** Berger’s public revision of the secularization thesis demonstrates exemplary scholarly humility: his theory follows the evidence rather than defending its initial premises. His later writings provide a more globally adequate account of religion’s persistence and transformation under modernity (Berger 2002).
5. **Actionable Theological Typology:** The typology of theological responses, deductive, reductive, and inductive, offers a lucid conceptual map for theological engagement within pluralistic publics, even for those who question Berger’s preference for the inductive strategy.

Weaknesses / Open Problems

1. **Early Asymmetry:** If religion is anthropologically grounded in the lifeworld as a response to marginal situations, Berger's early confidence in wholesale secular decline underplays religion's resilience; precisely the feature he later recognizes.
2. **Criterion Problem in Induction:** Berger invokes "reason" to sift genuine from spurious experiences of transcendence but offers no robust criteria. Without such standards, the inductive route risks sliding into subjectivism or accommodating any experience dressed in sacred language.
3. **Relativism and Confessional Tension:** An inductive, plural-friendly theology can blunt sharp doctrinal claims. Traditions that stake salvation on exclusive truth may see Berger's approach as covertly reductive.
4. **Power and Inequality:** Berger's market metaphor for pluralism illuminates competition but can understate how power, regulation, and media ownership shape the religious field. Not all "choices" are equally available or visible.
5. **Post-Secular Politics:** Berger's focus is plausibility and meaning; less attention is given to the legal-political architectures (religious freedom regimes, party systems, welfare states) that condition religious vitality and public presence.

Conclusion: Berger After the Turn

Peter L. Berger's enduring contribution lies in his ability to show how religion can be both socially constructed and existentially weighty. His central insight, that human beings, biologically unfinished and existentially exposed, must construct a meaningful world, and that religion historically extends a sacred canopy over this world, continues to orient sociological and theological debates alike. Berger's account of modernization now reads as a twofold lesson: secularization is real but regional and reversible, while pluralism is pervasive and enduring. Within plural societies, belief persists as reflexive choice; lighter in authority yet heavier in deliberation.

For scholars and practitioners alike, the implications are double. First, analyses of contemporary religion should not presume decline; they should presume competition, hybridity, and continuous legitimation. Second, public theologies seeking credibility within plural publics may require an inductive posture; one attentive to shared human experiences such as hope, suffering, conscience, play, and humor as potential bridges to transcendence, without surrendering either the critical standards for assessing truth claims or the moral seriousness of theological discernment.

Future research can advance Berger's framework in three interrelated directions:

1. Criteria for authenticity: developing normative yet non-authoritarian methods for distinguishing genuine religious experience from its simulacra;
2. Power-critical analysis: examining how states, markets, and digital platforms structure visibility, authority, and access within the contemporary religious "market"; and
3. Phenomenology of the digital lifeworld: tracing how algorithmically curated environments reshape plausibility structures and the dynamics of belief.

Berger's framework does not resolve these questions, but it continues to chart the terrain. Under the fractured skies of modernity, his work reminds us that the human search for ultimate meaning does not cease; instead, it merely changes its form, seeking new canopies under which life can once again appear intelligible, connected, and whole.

Dissertation Information

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