Peter L. Berger and the Sociology of Religion

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Peter L. Berger (1929–2017) was one of the most influential sociologists of the last century. In the sociology of religion his status is uncontested. Since the publication of Berger's now classic *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) it has been almost impossible *not* to cite Berger in discussions of secularisation and, later, desecularisation. The idea of a 'sacred canopy' has itself been a key metaphor for the sociology of religion for more than fifty years now. When Berger recently passed away, mainstream media ran obituaries discussing the many facets of his scholarly contributions – evidence of his influence beyond a small circle of professional sociologists.

This article examines Berger's main contributions to the sociology of religion. It is not a systematic review of Berger's sizable oeuvre, and sidesteps his theological work entirely. Rather, the focus is on the ideas presented in *The Sacred Canopy*, namely the theorisations of religion and secularisation, and his later espousal of 'desecularisation'. After an exposition and assessment of these key themes, the article looks at Berger's influence in the sociology of religion, and, finally, offers an 'internal critique' of his work: I argue that the reception of *The Sacred Canopy* has been a missed opportunity in terms of a genuinely constructionist approach to the sociology of religion and, most importantly, that the source of this is Berger's inconsistent application of his own constructionist ideas to his work on religion.

Sociology of Religion and Sociology of Knowledge

In an early article titled 'Sociology of Religion and Sociology of Knowledge' (1969[1963]), Berger and his most famous collaborator, Thomas Luckmann (1928–2016) show the reader a glimpse of their approach to the sociology of knowledge that would later be expanded into *The Social Construction of Reality*, and which colours their respective takes on the sociology of religion as well. They argue that instead of 'religious market research', religion should be understood sociologically as an institution that provides meaning and legitimates the social order, that is, an essential part of 'world-building', which in turn is the domain of sociology of knowledge. The subtitle of *The Social Construction of Reality* – 'A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge' – is modest, if not misleading: Berger and Luckmann's project is much more wide-ranging. Indeed, already in 1963 they admitted conceiving the sociology of knowledge 'as being properly concerned with the whole area of the relationship of social structure and consciousness' (Berger and Luckmann, 1969: 416).This is nothing less than an attempt at cracking what has later been referred to as the 'structure-agency problem' in sociology (e.g. Giddens, 1979). Hence, in order to fully appreciate Berger's sociology of religion, it is important to understand it in the context of the sociology of knowledge outlined in *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger, 1967: vi–vii). Indeed, although he might have famously changed his mind about secularisation, the sociological backcloth of his thinking remains the same:

> I have remained smugly satisfied with the theoretical approach we [Berger and Luckmann] concocted in those early years … as I increasingly turned from theory to empirical problems, I found the sociology-of-knowledge paradigm of my early work very useful and have not been motivated to exchange it for another (Berger, 2001a: 454).

As I will argue below, Berger's application of the 'sociology-of-knowledge paradigm' to the sociology of religion can be questioned. Nevertheless, in terms of intellectual framing and conceptual development, any discussion of Berger and the sociology of religion should – I think – begin with *The Social Construction of Reality*.

Berger and Luckmann distil their approach into the following much-quoted idea: '*Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product*' (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 61. Emphasis in the original). This dialectical process of world-building is comprised of three 'moments' that correspond to the different parts of the definition: externalization (society is a human product), objectivation (society is an objective reality), and internalization (humans are a social product).

World-building is a precarious endeavour, however. Social order risks a lapse into chaos unless it is continuously maintained or, in Berger and Luckmann's terms, legitimated. 'Symbolic universes' are the most comprehensive of all forms of legitimation. They are 'processes of signification that refer to realities other than those of everyday experience' (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 95). When institutional arrangements are seen as the will of the god(s) or as an outcome of 'natural law', these arrangements are legitimated on a cosmic scale. Philosophy, science and religion are examples of these kind of symbolic universes – and it is as a symbolic universe that Berger's views on the nature of religion should be approached.

Berger's attitude towards defining religion has been a reluctant one at best. The following is the closest that *The Sacred Canopy* comes to giving a definition of religion:

[Religion is] the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred

order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-

present face of chaos […] Every human society is, in the last resort, men banded

together in the face of death. The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon

the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death,

or more accurately, as they walk inevitably towards it (Berger, 1967: 51).

Religion is, then, functionally speaking, a bulwark against the terror of chaos. Yet, secular

alternatives, such as 'personal philosophies of life, scientific world-views, secular philosophies

such as Marxism and nihilism, or commonsensical ideas about luck and fate' (Wuthnow, 1986:

127) could be argued to fulfil the same function. Indeed, this is what Thomas Luckmann

argues, to an extent, in his *The Invisible Religion* (1967). Berger takes issue with this functional

definition already in the appendix of *The Sacred Canopy* (1967: 177) and later in an often-cited

essay (Berger, 1974). For Berger, it is the substantive part of the above definition that makes

religion special: the 'sacred cosmos' is unlike other functional legitimations. The sacred is, in a

tone strongly echoing Rudolf Otto, 'a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than

man yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience' (Berger,

1967: 25).

Now, even with the qualification of sacredness as a qualitatively different form of legitimation,

the idea of symbolic universes retains a functionalist aura. The idea of legitimation seems to

suggest, by definition, that religion is socially and sociologically meaningful by virtue of the fact

that it provides a 'sacred canopy', that is, it has a social function.

I would argue that it is misleading to call Berger a sociological functionalist. In fact, it is the structural-functionalist tradition associated especially with Talcott Parsons that is the foil of *The Social Construction of Reality* (Pfadenhauer, 2013: 103). Instead, it is the foundational assumptions from phenomenology and philosophical anthropology that constitute, or require, the functional parts of Berger's definition. In lieu of arguing that religion is a functional requisite of a well-integrated society – although religion *can* play a legitimating role – Berger's 'functionalism' refers to the propensity for meaning-making and need for order that are, Berger argues (following Schutz and Gehlen), part of the human condition. Characteristic of Berger's 'nomadism' between sociology and phenomenology, he manages to be a foundationalist and a constructionist at the same time – a trait that has led some scholars identifying as social constructionists to abandon Berger's assumptions regarding human nature while retaining the sociological focus on interaction (e.g. Beckford, 2003: 29). Indeed, what is interesting about Berger's discussions about the definition of religion is that he continues to work within the functionalist-substantive binary, without being particularly constructionist, as I argue below.

Berger's Elements of Religion

Neither did Berger purport to offer a comprehensive theory of religion – constructionist or otherwise. The subtitle of *The Sacred Canopy* is 'elements of a sociological theory of religion'. As with Berger's way of defining religion, his positioning on the theory of religion map depends on which of his 'elements' one focuses on. These elements – which demonstrate Berger's embeddedness in the canonical classics of sociology – are (1) anomy, (2) theodicy, (3) alienation, and (4) plausibility structure. The first two attempt to explain the appeal of religion,

i.e. why there is religion in the first place; the latter two tackle the questions why and how

religion is successful.

Anomy. Starting with Durkheim, Berger applies the concept made famous in *Suicide*

(1979[1897]). As is often the case with Berger, his point is not to be exegetical or particularly

faithful to the original usage (also changing the word from the commonly used French original,

anomie). For Durkheim, anomie/y is a state of normlessness, where old norms and values do

not unite society anymore, but new ones are yet to replace them. Anomic suicide is the result

of the psychological anxiety caused by this ultimately social source. Berger, however, uses the

term in the phenomenological sense: anomy means terror in the face of disorder which

threatens to make human existence meaningless for both individuals and societies alike

(Berger, 1967: 22–3). The human answer – again both on the level of consciousness and on the

social level – to the constant threat of anomy is nomization, the imposition of meaningful

order upon reality. Unlike for Durkheim, for whom anomie is a state of *social* disintegration,

Berger sees nomization as part of the human condition: 'the anthropological presupposition

for this is a human craving for meaning, which appears to have the force of instinct' (Berger,

1967: 22).

Theodicy. Continuing in Durkheimian tones, Berger suggests that the sacred is not just the

opposite of the profane, but 'on a deeper level', the opposite of chaos: 'The sacred cosmos,

which transcends and includes man in its ordering of reality, thus provides man's ultimate

shield against the terror of anomy' (Berger, 1967: 26). Now, this rhymes with one of Weber's

key concepts in the sociology of religion, theodicy, which Berger appropriates: 'an explanation

of [anomic] phenomena in terms of religious legitimations, of whatever degree of theoretical

sophistication, may be called a theodicy' (Berger, 1967: 54; Campbell, 2001: 77). This is, as with

Weber, a much broader use of the term originally associated with the Christian problem of evil in a world created by an omnipotent and good God. In Berger's terms theodicy refers to world-maintenance in a religious framework. Here again we witness Berger's dual functional-substantive approach: theodicy is a (functional) shield against the terror of anomic chaos, but it is so in a very special sense, because the (substantive) 'religious framework' refers to a 'transhumanly legitimated realm' (Paden, 2016: 68).

Alienation. For all his (rather long-standing and consistent) vitriol against Marxism, Berger's work shows intimate familiarity with the work of Marx, whose ideas pop up in both *The Social Construction of Reality* and *The Sacred Canopy*. Berger's Marx is first and foremost the early Marx of *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*, and the key concept Marx provides for Berger's 'elements' is alienation. For Marx, alienation is the consequence of the exploitative nature of work under capitalism, and he discussed several forms of alienation (see e.g. Ollman, 1976). For Berger, who appropriates the Hegelian elements without the social critique of Marx, alienation is a specific feature of religious symbolic universes. In the broadest sense (and synonymously with reification discussed above) alienation in Berger refers to the process in which

> [T]he individual 'forgets' that this world was and continues to be co-produced by him. Alienated consciousness is undialectical consciousness. The essential difference between the socio-cultural world and the world of nature is obscured – namely, the difference that men have made the first but not the second (Berger, 1967: 85).

Religion is supremely alienating because it transforms 'human products into supra- or non-human facticities. The humanly made world is explained in terms that deny its human production' (Berger, 1967: 89).

Plausibility structure. The last element of Berger's theoretical formulation of religion – plausibility structure – is his most original (although it bears resemblance to the idea of the 'reference group', associated with the work of Robert K. Merton). Religious worlds are precarious: On the one hand there are many competing religions offering their version of the only truth out there. On the other hand science challenges many strict interpretations of sacred texts. This religious worlds need to be constantly reaffirmed. Plausibility structures are the social networks that maintain the plausibility of religious beliefs even when these beliefs are challenged by competing explanations. Plausibility is provided simply by belonging to a community of similar-minded people, and by rituals that strengthen the sense of belonging to these communities (Berger, 1970: 34–8).

What emerges from the above 'elements' is very characteristically Bergerian: eclectic and consistent at the same time. Eclectic in the way he freely appropriates concepts and ideas from sociology's three founding classics; consistent in the way the anthropological 'constant' of humans' search for meaning features in the centre of the theorisations – and how this foundation shapes the use of the sociological concepts.

Secularisation and Desecularisation

Berger's 'elements' constitute the 'systematic' part of *The Sacred Canopy*. The second part of the book deals with the 'historical' application of these elements, namely secularisation. Berger's theory of secularisation has been discussed by many (e.g. Dobbelaere, 1981; Bruce, 2001; cf. Warner, 1993), so only a brief exposition will suffice here. Instead, the focus will be on Berger's attempt to revise his own theories under the concept of 'desecularisation'.

Berger defines secularisation as 'the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols' (Berger, 1967: 107). He goes on:

> [I]n modern Western history, of course, secularization manifests itself in the evacuation by the Christian Churches of areas previously under their control or influence – as in the separation of church and state, or in the expropriation of church lands, or in the emancipation of education from ecclesiastical authority (Berger, 1967: 107).

This type of secularisation Berger calls structural or objective secularisation, as it pertains specifically to the differentiation of social institutions and the 'location' of religion in the objectivated structure of society (cf. Hammond, 1986: 146). The description of the process of differentiation is rather uncontroversial as such, and most sociologists of religion would agree that this indeed has been the case for much of Europe, at least. Things get messier when 'secularisation' is expanded to include individual loss of faith, and tied together with a theory of modernisation.

The second type, subjective secularisation, or the secularisation of consciousness, refers to the loss of religious plausibility at the individual level. The 'ultimate' meaning of life is no longer provided by religion, but by secular alternatives – if provided at all (Berger, 1967: 107–108). Berger points especially to psychology and psychotherapy as important sources of individual meaning-making in the modern world (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 175–80; Berger, 1967: 151–2).

The secularisation of consciousness is dialectically connected to structural secularisation, and cannot be properly understood in terms of simple mechanistic causality (Berger, 1967: 128). His most famous assertion, that pluralism begets secularisation, should also be understood dialectically, on both levels of secularisation. On the one hand, structural secularisation itself leads to pluralism, when a single religious tradition loses the monopoly on truth (Berger, 1967: 137). Pluralism, in turn, reinforces secularisation on both the structural level and the level of consciousness:

> The pluralistic situation multiplies the number of plausibility structures competing with each other. Ipso facto, it relativizes their religious contents. More specifically, the religious contents are 'de-objectivated', that is, deprived of their status as taken-for-granted, objective reality in consciousness. They become 'subjectivized' in a double sense: their 'reality' becomes a 'private' affair of individuals, that is, loses the quality of self-evident intersubjective plausibility … And their 'reality' in so far as it is still maintained by the individual, is apprehended as being rooted within the consciousness of the individual rather than in any facticities of the external world (Berger, 1967: 151–2).

This is perhaps the most original part of Berger's theorising. In his discussion on the historical sources of secularisation Berger follows Weber rather faithfully: The two main 'carriers' of secularisation are modern capitalism and the rationalisation it begets, and the Christian tradition itself, Protestant (Calvinist/Puritan) Christianity especially. The most controversial aspect of Berger's argument has been to tie together modernisation (à la Weber) and secularisation. In *The Sacred Canopy* and his other earlier writings Berger seems to think of secularisation as a linear process and an inevitable result of modernisation, which leads to the change of the structural location of religion and, ultimately, to the erosion of religion at the level of individual consciousness Like so many other sociologists of religion of his time, the early Berger saw little future for religion in the modern world.

Fast forward 30 years, and Berger's argument has turned on its head: '[T]he assumption that we live in a secularized world is false' (Berger, 1999: 2). Instead of secularisation, Berger asserts, we have a world that is 'as furiously religious as it ever was' (1999: 2). Instead of simply finding that his earlier analyses had 'little empirical substance' (Berger, 1992: 15), we are witnessing a 'desecularisation of the world' (Berger, 1999).

Berger's about-face can be considered problematic on many accounts. Most importantly, there is no attempt to engage with the theoretical dynamics of the putative resurgence of religion in *The Desecularization of the World*, the most famous source of the new claim. Proof of religious vitality (which also can be measured in different ways) is not in itself proof against the secularisation thesis – unless it explicitly challenges some of the theoretical assumptions of the thesis. As Steve Bruce (2001: 94) puts it: 'As Iran is unlike Essex in most regards, I see no reason why the secularization thesis should fall because the religious evolution of these places has differed'.

In his last major book on religion, *The Many Altars of Modernity* (2014), Berger addressed his recantation in more theoretical terms. He conceded that secularisation on the objective level is an empirical fact. The following line from *The Many Altars of Modernity* could have been written in 1967:

> In the course of modernization, for various reasons, societal functions that used to be vested in religious institutions have now become differentiated between the latter and other (mostly new or redefined) institutions – church and state, religion and the economy, religion and education, and so forth. (Berger, 2014: x).

The problem, then, which Berger did not explicate in *The Desecularization of the World*, is that if and when this objective secularisation happens, how come individuals remain religious? If pluralism begets institutional secularisation, it should beget secularisation on the level of consciousness as well. However, the empirical evidence and conceptual formulations such as Grace Davie's (1994) 'believing without belonging', and the rise of 'spirituality' to explain the resilience of religion in the modern world challenged this assumption. Berger acknowledged this already in 2001 at least when, in a response chapter to an anthology of other scholars' essays on his work on religion, he stated that 'pluralism affects the *how* of religious belief, but not necessarily the *what*' (Berger, 2001: 194). 'Religion' might have moved away from the pews, but that does not mean it has disappeared. Owing to a 'rather unexpected idea' in 2012, Berger started putting together a more systematic treatment of the question of pluralization and secularisation of consciousness:

> [A]s a duly accredited specialist in the sociology of knowledge, I should have recalled a basic insight of this approach: If it is to function in society, every institution must have a correlate in consciousness. Therefore, if a differentiation has occurred between religious institutions in society, this differentiation must also be manifested in the consciousness of individuals. (Berger, 2014: x).

Pluralisation and differentiation do *not* lead to the disappearance of religion in individual consciousness (as the original argument went), but rather the realignment of the role of religion in individual lives (the 'how' of religious belief). 'Modernity necessarily leads to pluralism' (Berger, 2014: 20), but the choice is not between religion and no religion. Hence:

> Most religious people, even very fervent ones, operate within a secular discourse in important areas of their lives. Put differently, for most believers there is not a stark either/or dichotomy between faith and secularity but rather a fluid construction of both/and. (2014: x).

Berger adopts Eisenstadt's concept of 'multiple modernities' for his explanation of the continuing vitality of religion on the individual level. Hence, even though pluralism might have led to institutional differentiation, this does not automatically lead to the secularisation of consciousness. The multiple spheres of the structural level are replicated in consciousness. Secular discourse is just one discourse among others. We can be completely secularized in our economic life and transactions, Berger argues, but still go to church on Sundays.

There are valid reasons to doubt whether even the recent conceptual reformulation of desecularisation will manage to convince those who consider Berger's about-face regarding secularisation a mistake (Bruce, 2001; Pollack, 2014), and whether *The Many Altars of Modernity* will become the 'new paradigm' for the sociology of religion that it purports to be. The jury is still out on whether 'desecularisation' is a useful concept to begin with (cf. Karpov, 2010), but it can be safely said that Berger's recantation has contributed to the breaking of the hegemony of the secularisation thesis in the sociology of religion.

Assessing Berger's Influence

With a publication history spanning six decades, it is very difficult to accurately assess Berger's influence on the sociology of religion. Hence the following is intended as a rough outline rather than a definitive account. I will start with a numerical overview, and then typify the common uses of *The Sacred Canopy* in particular.

Google Scholar's search for 'sacred canopy Berger' comes up with 8525 results (as of April 2017), which, as a rough indicator, is impressive enough in a field where a publication garnering 30 citations can be considered successful. However, Google is weaker the further from the current date the search extends, and lists rather random entries from the medical sciences, for example. Although Google's coverage of non-academic literature can be an advantage for someone with resources to sift through the massive index, a more accurate picture of the book's relevance can be gained with a Web of Science (WoS) search (cf. Knoblauch and Wilke, 2016: 56–7). Two indicators can be gleaned from this more curated data.

[Insert Figure 5 here]

First, a look at citation trends: Although references to *The Sacred Canopy* took off from the start, the peak decade for the book was 1988–1997 (see Figure 5). Tracing the reasons for this is difficult, but a plausible suggestion would be the interest generated by R. Stephen Warner's (1993) hugely influential article on the 'new paradigm' in the sociology of religion, and consequent discussions on 'rational choice theory'. Interestingly, these debates pitted Berger against himself by referring to *The Sacred Canopy* as the old paradigm in terms of its theory of secularisation on the one hand, but took from Berger the idea of religious markets on the other (e.g. Finke and Stark, 1988; Warner, 1993). Also interestingly, the publication of Berger's own *The Desecularization of the World* in 1999 did not generate a comparable surge in citations contrasting his divergent position on secularisation in *The Sacred Canopy* and the latter work. The rise in citations in the last decade shows that *The Sacred Canopy* is far from a forgotten classic, even if the context in which the book is referred to cannot be deduced from the numbers alone.

Second, the WoS shows that in contrast to *The Social Construction of Reality* (Knoblauch and Wilke, 2016: 57–8), *The Sacred Canopy*'s disciplinary spread is much narrower. This is rather unsurprising, of course, considering the narrower topic. Sociology (49% of N=1021) and 'religion' (45%) share the bulk of citations, with the next most popular disciplines, psychology (7%) and 'other social science topics' (6%), trailing far behind.[1]

A word search of hundreds of journal articles provides only limited information, of course. Ritualistic citation of an established classic comes up as a hit as much as a thorough

operationalisation and empirical testing of theory. One indicator that I was interested in was

the proportion of articles that focus on Berger's theory secularization. Rather surprisingly, of

the 1021 works citing *The Sacred Canopy* in WoS, only 168 include *secular** with its various

endings. The bulk of these are empirical analyses, with the rational choice debate of the 1990s

and early 2000s taking up a significant portion. The interesting question, however, is what the

non-secularization references are. A quick glance shows various empirical tests of religious

commitment and the impact of religion on various other variables, with theoretical and

historical studies adding to the variety. Another, more consistent strand operationalizes

Berger's concept of plausibility and plausibility structure (Roof, 1976; 1978; Hunter, 1983;

Wuthnow, 1986: 134–5). A comprehensive analysis is not possible here, but it seems that

describing Berger simply as a 'secularization theorist' is not justified in light of the raw citation

numbers for *The Sacred Canopy*.

A closer look at the impact of Berger's ideas on secularisation is justified, however, as it shows

the characteristic patterns of influence. Further, even if secularisation is not the most

numerous point of reference, the works that cite *The Sacred Canopy* to discuss secularisation

are the most influential (e.g. Casanova, 1994; Taylor, 2007; see below). Secularisation has

provided scholars both a foundation and a foil – not least because it has done so for Berger

himself. Here I have reduced the references to the original secularisation theory presented in

the *The Sacred Canopy* into four ideal types, if you will: (1) exemplar, (2) theory-building, (3)

theory testing, and (4) ritual refutations.

First, many studies refer to *The Sacred Canopy* as a classic or influential example of

secularisation theory—a paradigm-influencing *exemplar* in the Kuhnian sense. This is especially

so in textbook accounts of the sociology of religion (e.g. Hamilton, 2002: ch. 15; Furseth and

Repstad, 2006: 84–5; Davie, 2007: 52–4). More analytically, Tschannen's (1991) often-quoted

systemization of secularisation theories and Warner's (1993) abovementioned article on the

paradigm shift in American sociology of religion are instances where *The Sacred Canopy*

functions as a key source for typifying or critiquing Berger's argument that pluralisation and

secularisation go hand in hand.

Second, *The Sacred Canopy* has been engaged in more thorough ways, as part of *theory-

building* attempts. These relate either to Berger's theory of religion, or his theory of

secularisation—the latter being much more numerous. In his *The Promise of Salvation: A

Theory of Religion*, Martin Riesebrodt (2010) mostly agrees with Berger, whereas Christian

Smith's (2017) recent critical realist theory of religion engages the metatheoretical deficiencies

of Berger's work. On secularisation, Dobbelaere's (1981; 2002) restatement is a prime example

of a theory-building type of reference. Many of other similar theory-building endeavours take

a particular aspect of Berger's work and incorporate that into the emerging theoretical

construction (e.g. Casanova, 1994; Taylor, 2007; cf. Zondervan, 2005). For example, Beyer's

influential *Religion and Globalization* (1994), although ultimately espousing a Luhmannian

view, engages with Berger's ideas on the private-public distinction in order to develop a fuller

theory. The difference, hence, between exemplar and theory-building uses is to actually

engage with the arguments instead of simply offering them as cases to support or oppose.

Interestingly, even this kind of deeper engagement with the secularisation theory presented in

The Sacred Canopy rarely positions it within the broader view of religion presented in the first

part of the book. Instead, it is a specific dynamic (the pluralism-secularisation connection) that

is cherry-picked. As I argue below, this trend has had particular consequences for the reception

of *The Sacred Canopy* and Berger's work more broadly.

Third, to much lesser degree, Berger's version of secularisation theory has been subjected to empirical testing. Notably, the pluralisation-secularisation link so prominent in *The Sacred Canopy* has been subjected to empirical analyses with large datasets by scholars in what later became known as the rational choice theory (RCT) approach, and even later, the economics of religion (Iannaccone, 1998). Their argument, summarised in one of the foundational publications of the approach (Finke and Stark, 1988: 42), is that 'we agree with Berger that pluralism forces religions to compete for adherents. Unlike Berger, however, we view competition as a stimulus for religious growth and not an avenue for its demise'. As is often the case in the social sciences, the RCT reversal of Berger's claim has in turn been refuted by Chaves and Gorski's (2001) review of large-N studies. They argue that in light of many studies suggesting no link between pluralism and secularisation there is reason to suggest that Berger's original formulation needs to be rethought. However, the evidence for the RCT claim is even weaker. The discussion continues, but it is worth noting that Bruce's (2011) eloquent defence of secularisation theory omits discussion of the pluralisation-secularisation link altogether.

Finally, the theory of secularisation presented in *The Sacred Canopy* is referred to in what I call *ritual refutations*. What makes this type of reference interesting is that Berger himself set the scene for it with the publication of *The Desecularization of the World* (1999). Despite being a disappointment for many sociologists of religion (e.g. Williams, 2001; Bruce, 2001), the impact of the book has been considerable. Questions of academic rigour notwithstanding, it has become the rallying point for scholars and religious practitioners celebrating the demise of the secularization thesis. Indeed, talk of 'desecularization' has *legitimated* – in genuinely Bergerian terms – a hostility towards the secularization thesis even in cases where it is not at all clear from the data that this is justified. Neither is the use of 'desecularization' very sophisticated in

cases where the debunking of secularization does not properly address theoretical issues originally presented in *The Sacred Canopy* – hence the ritual, rather than analytical, nature of these references. As Pollack (2015: 60) quite correctly states, 'criticizing the secularization theory has become a new master narrative itself'. Whatever intentions Berger originally had, 'desecularization' has in many cases done a disservice to the analytical study of religion (AUTHOR BLINDED). Hadden's (1987) scathing critique of the secularization thesis – 'a taken-for-granted *ideology* rather than a systematic set of interrelated propositions' – now applies equally well to claims about desecularization.

Constructionist Sociology of Religion: A Missed Opportunity?

Speaking of the genesis of *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger tells a story how he and some of his colleagues at the New School were dreaming of an 'academic empire' that would systematise ideas put forth by Alfred Schutz, and 'change the character of sociology' (Berger, 2011: 81–81). When he and Thomas Luckmann sat down to write *The Social Construction of Reality*, their aims were perhaps more modest, yet despite the book's subtitle and narrow categorisation as sociology of knowledge, they were engaging in just the kind of 'basic reformulation of sociological theory' that they envisaged the original multi-author project to be (Berger, 2011: 81, 89).

Now, if the sociology of religion 'should be understood as belonging under the sociology of knowledge' (Berger, 2011), as Berger and Luckmann claimed already in their 1963 article that was the springboard for *The Social Construction of Reality*, *The Sacred Canopy*, and Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* (1967), what are the implications for the sociology of religion? In *The*

Social Construction of Reality Berger and Luckmann stated that 'the sociology of knowledge must concern itself with whatever passes for 'knowledge' in society' (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 3). This was not intellectual history, but a 'democratisation' of the concept of knowledge, initially suggested by Schutz (Berger, 2011: 81). Logically, when translated to concern religion, *the sociology of religion must concern itself with whatever passes for 'religion' in society*. Yet, this was not what readers took home from *The Sacred Canopy*, and certainly not something that created an 'academic empire'. Why?

I would like to offer three suggestions for an answer; two having to do with *The Sacred Canopy* itself and its reception, the third more diffuse. First, there is nothing particularly 'constructionist' in the way either religion in general or secularization in particular has been conceptualized and empirically studied in the vast majority of the corpus of research citing the book. It is only more recently that we have witnessed the emergence of approaches taking the idea of social construction, and especially the role of language, seriously (see below).

Second, as also briefly mentioned above, the book itself and Berger's work in general after 1968 took a turn not amenable to a creation of a constructionist sociology of religion. Berger's disdain for the Marxism—although not Marx, whose concepts play a key role in his own theories—launched in the 1968 movements is legendary; there is hardly a publication where he doesn't mention it. The relevance of this for a constructionist sociology of religion is that Berger felt that the ideas of *The Social Construction of Reality* were 'incorporated into the ascendant ideology', which he described as 'an orgy of ideology and utopianism' (Berger, 2011: 92). Consequently, two things happened: as Knoblauch and Wilke (2016) show, both Berger and Luckmann abandoned 'social construction' and have continued to insist that they are not 'constructivists' (Berger, 2011: 95; 2001b: 454). Further, as Turner (2008: 496) argues, Berger's

trajectory has been to emphasise order at the expense of construction and its contingencies.

'Was this, at least partly, a result of my recoiling from the destructive disorder of the late

1960s', Berger (2001a: 191) asks himself (note the word choice). Yes and no: Yes, because the

focus did shift from construction to order—already in the *The Sacred Canopy*, one could argue,

and definitely after that. No, because order, especially in the form Gehlen presented it as an

anthropological necessity, was present in Berger's writings since the early 1960s (Berger and

Kellner, 1965).

Finally, and here we enter fuzzier terrain, there was perhaps no need for an explicitly

constructionist sociology of religion because constructionism became for many an implicit

premise of social research. Many probably identify with Eileen Barker (2013: 41) when she

says: 'I was also greatly influenced by Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality*,

and would still, if pushed, call myself a social constructionist'. Even when used explicitly, the

different—and differing—connotations of '(social) construction' were often left unexplored

(AUTHOR BLINDED; Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 1). Despite the putative diffusion of the idea of

social construction, there have been few attempts to systematise or operationalise a

constructionist sociology of religion—something that one might perhaps expect from a field so

thoroughly influenced by Berger.

There are, of course, some scholars who have been rather more explicit about their stance. I

will only mention three examples, although there are probably more. I have deliberately

omitted cases which would qualify as constructionist, but clearly in a different, often

Foucauldian sense (e.g. Brown, 2009), and cases—especially in religious studies—which are

more about metatheory and the construction of the discipline of religious studies rather than

an approach to empirical research (see Moberg, 2013). Neither have I here referred to the idea

of 'communicative construction of transcendence', which, although rooted in *The Social Construction of Reality*, is more directly inspired by the problematics raised by Luckmann's understanding of religion (Knoblauch, 2014; Knoblauch and Steets, 2018; Luckmann, 2013).

Although perhaps better known for his sweeping surveys of American religion, Robert Wuthnow's earlier work, especially, took the idea of social construction and its operationalisation as discourse and discourse analysis seriously in a way few other sociologists of religion did at the time (e.g. Wuthnow, 1989; 1992). He has also discussed Berger's work directly in several publications (Wuthnow, 1986; 1992, Wuthnow et al., 1984), and has lately returned to the theme of discourse as an analytical lens in the sociology of religion (Wuthnow, 2011). As Wuthnow (2011: 1) puts it: 'A close reading of the social science literature prior to the 1980s would suggest that religious people rarely spoke and probably were completely mute'. This is unsatisfactory, because '[r]eligion, after all, is not primarily a matter of moods and motivations; it comes to us as we interact with others and it is reinforced by that interaction. And much of that interaction consists of discourse' (Wuthnow, 1992: 5). (It could be added that much of the later literature Wuthnow reviews does use talk as a resource, but does not necessarily conceptualise it in a constructionist/discursive way). The echoes of Berger's work are evident in Wuthnow's argument (plausibility structures as interaction that reinforces religious belief), but he takes the important step of moving beyond meaning as something that we can credibly postulate inside the heads of individuals, as Berger—Wuthnow argues—is wont to do. Instead, a focus on 'symbolism and discourse offers a way of identifying observable, objective materials for analysis' (Wuthnow, 1992: 32). In a way, Wuthnow is more faithful to Berger and Luckmann's (1967: 22, 34–41) emphasis on language as the primary vehicle of world-making and world-maintenance than Berger himself.

The second well-known name in the sociology of religion who has explicated the constructionist approach to religion is James A. Beckford. In his early work on the conversion of Jehovah's Witnesses, Beckford (1978) uses terms such as 'accounts' and 'talk' to describe his empirical material. The 'actors' talk about conversion ceases to be an objective resource for the sociologist and becomes, instead, an interesting topic in own right' (Beckford, 1978: 250). Although this early work does not identify explicitly as 'constructionist', the seeds of Beckford's later approach are apparent already here. The study of New Religious Movements (in which Beckford is a major contributor) has also utilised the idea of social construction widely, although the influence in that field can be traced more to constructionist sociology of social problems than Berger (AUTHOR BLINDED). Beckford's constructionist 'manifesto' is of later vintage, and can be found in *Social Theory and Religion* (2003), especially its opening chapter 'Religion: A Social Constructionist Approach'. Here Beckford takes issue mainly with sociological definitions of religion:

> From a social scientific point of view, it would be better to abandon the search for, and the assumption that there are, generic qualities of religion and, instead, to analyse the various situations in which religious meaning or significance is constructed, attributed or challenged. (Beckford, 2003: 16).

This is a direct continuation of the strategy for analysis in his earlier work on conversion, but now expanded to include the endeavour of social scientific analysis of religion as a whole. Beckford does not, however, outline a method for investigating meaning. Based on his work on conversion accounts and some later remarks, it is safe to say that like for Wuthnow, 'meaning' for Beckford manifests in empirically accessible talk and discourse. Indeed, Beckford makes an

important caveat regarding his constructionism and that usually associated with Berger and

Luckmann:

> [M]y approach differs markedly from the approach of Peter Berger and
>
> Thomas Luckmann. Their work rests on assumptions about the
>
> 'anthropological necessity' for human beings to fend off chaos by socially
>
> constructing sacred frames of meaning. It posits a phenomenology of mental
>
> categories that are supposedly constitutive of all human meaning. These
>
> issues fall outside the scope of this book. (Beckford, 2003: 16).

Finally, an approach (if you will) is emerging in the sociology of religion and religious studies,

which draws from Berger's work but develops it and aims to operationalise it even further than

Wuthnow and Beckford do. This critical discursive study of religion (CDSR) takes seriously

Berger's (2011: 91) assertion that language is 'the most fundamental human institution' and

combines the theoretical language of construction with methodological tools from (critical)

discourse analysis (AUTHOR BLINDED). Importantly, the discursive analysis of text and talk

does not stop at metatheory ('what is this or that scholar's definition of religion'), but provides

tools for empirical analyses of what passes for 'religion' in society—the Bergerian objective of

the sociology of religion offered above. Although differing from Berger's overall orientation—

especially in its employment of ideology critique, a pet abomination in Berger's view of

sociology—CDSR avoids loose talk of 'construction' by explicating it's theoretical and

methodological premises.

Conclusion

There is no question that *The Sacred Canopy* has been influential: the citation data shows numbers that most scholars only dream of. Berger's impact on discussions on pluralism, secularisation, and religious plausibility is undeniable, even if some of the citations are rather ritualistic references. The case is much more ambiguous for the theoretical approach Berger claims to have been espousing since his early work.

Some of Berger's more recent works, *The Many Altars of Modernity* especially, attest to a continuing interest in the same theoretical questions originally formulated more than fifty years ago and crystallised in *The Sacred Canopy*. However, the analysis in this paper suggests that, in the sociology of religion at least, the 'sociology-of-knowledge paradigm' is the least influential aspect of Berger's otherwise canonical work. 'Constructionism' as an epistemological position has been massively influential, of course, but it is not possible to trace the emergence of a particular constructionist sociology of religion to Berger from the numerical citation data or the key thematic references.

Scholarly legacies are tricky things, and few scholars are entirely happy with the use of their ideas—Berger's disownment of 'constructivism' is a prime example of this. We also cannot decide which aspects of our work get picked up and which do not. But in Berger's case, some of the reasons why an identifiable constructionist approach to the sociology of religion failed to emerge spring from his own work. Not only did Berger's ideas on secularisation and the later 180-degree turn to desecularisation draw attention away from questions of basic orientation in the sub-discipline. In addition, Berger seemed to lose interest in developing his (and Luckmann's) constructionism further. Finally—and maybe this is a qualified triumph for Berger—constructionism did emerge as an implicit framework in the sociology of religion, but

its theoretical refinement has been waiting in the wings for a surprisingly long time. Perhaps now, 50 years after *The Sacred Canopy*, the sociology of religion can be refocused to ask 'what passes for religion in society'—especially since this is a question that scholars and religious and secular people of the world increasingly confront in their lives.

Endnotes

[1] WoS citation percentages add up to more than 100% because of overlapping categories in the indexing of journals. 'Religion' includes some of the key journals also indexed under sociology, and religious studies and theology journals.

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