Unit 12

Peter Berger: Phenomenology of Religion

Contents

Learning Objectives

After you have studied this unit you should be able to:

- introduce Berger's theoretical framework;

- explain religion and world construction;

- outline existing perspectives in religion;

- describe secularization; and

- outline the future of religion.

12.1 Introduction

During the years of the Second World War, the authors we read the most on the sociology of religion were Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, Émile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel. Although they are still popular and read, the latter half of the twentieth-century brought to the fore some other authors whose work on the sociology of religion made a breakthrough. Among them are Talcott Parsons, David Martin, Robert Wuthnow, Robert Bellah, and of course, Peter Berger. In their respective writings, these authors have continued to combine a high-level of theorizing with close attention paid to empirical reality. But, of them, it is Berger who is believed to have contributed the most to the study of religion.

12.2 The Theoretical Framework

The basic aspects of Berger's theoretical framework were laid down in his book titled *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), which he wrote jointly with Thomas Luckmann. This book dealt with the sociology of knowledge, exploring the relationship between conviction, commitment, and social reality. How and why are people convinced by certain phenomena and beliefs? Why do they remain committed to them, even when certain groups of people or individuals may express serious doubts about their credibility and veracity? And, how convictions and commitments shape their view of social reality? The arguments that developed in this joint

publication, which was rather general in orientation than concerned with any specific institution, were applied to the realm of religion in his *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), which was later published (in 1969) under the title *The Social Reality of Religion*.

Berger used this theoretical framework in a number of his subsequent works; for instance, in understanding the 'modern condition' (in his books *The Homeless Mind*, 1973; and *Facing up to Modernity*, 1979), the dynamics of family (in *The War over the Family*, 1983); and to the issues of economy and development (in *Pyramids of Sacrifice*, 1974; and *The Capitalist Revolution*, 1987). But, religion (and its modern forms) has been one of Berger's life-time commitments, and it is for his academic as well as popular writings on religion that he is internationally known. His initial focus was on the fate of religion (particularly Christianity) in America and Europe (in his books, both published in 1961, *The Precarious Vision*: *A Sociologist looks at Social Fictions and the Christian Faith*; and *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*: *Christian Commitment and the Religious Establishment*). Later, he broadened his scope of enquiry to include the spread of Islam and Charismatic Christianity. Interestingly, his books – particularly *A Rumour of Angels*, 1969; *The Heretical Imperative*, 1979; and *Redeeming Laughter*, 1997 – have exercised a profound influence within the churches, and are frequently cited. The appeal of his writings to a wide audience seems to lie in his starting point, which is empirical, beginning with everyday life experiences, and also the clarity of his prose. Moreover, in his role as Director of the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture (in Boston), a position he has held since 1985, he has been able to further his academic interests and test his ideas by advising researchers to undertake fieldwork in different parts of the world.

12.3   World-Construction

Berger's work on religion begins with locating its place in the enterprise of world-building. Every human society is concerned with the task of constructing a world around it – understanding the meaning of various phenomena, drawing relationships between them, formulating the theories of causality, endeavouring to control or supplicate the natural forces. Whatever and whichever world human beings construct has no other existence except what they collectively give it. Berger (1967:13) writes:

Society is a product of man. It has no other being except that which is bestowed upon it by human activity and consciousness. There can be no social reality apart from man.

Moving further, Berger pays considerable attention to understanding the relationship between human beings and society, which he finds dialectical, in the sense that 'society is the product of man and man is the product of society.' Man creates society, and in turn his 'product' defines, influences, and shapes him. His identity is known through society. His existence outside (or without) society is unthinkable. Society was there before he was born and it will continue to exist after his demise. And, at the same time, society does not change on its own terms; it is man who brings about changes in society, thereby modifying, perfecting, and making it more livable and meaningful. Berger's submission here is that no social reality can be comprehended empirically apart from the dialectic of man and society, including the phenomenon of religion.

The dialectic of 'man in society' and 'society in man' consists of, Berger says, three processes, which he calls 'moments or steps' (1967:14), namely externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Externalization is the 'ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical

and the mental activity of men' (1967:14). In simple words, it means that 'man, the biological organism' becomes 'man, the social being' by ceaselessly interacting with the 'extra-organismic' or 'extra-somatic' environment, which consists of both the physical and the human world (society and culture). Objectivation takes place when the products of human physical and mental activities attain a reality of their own that confronts its creators as a 'facticity' (or 'factuality') outside themselves. This would instantly bring to our mind the writings of the German scholars, Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, the authors who pioneered the concept of alienation.

Box 12.1   Internalization

The last process in Berger's scheme is internalization, which occurs when the 'objectivized reality' – the products of human physical and mental activities which stand outside human beings – are subjectively appropriated by them. Thus, the 'structures of the objective world' are transformed into 'structures of the subjective world'. In this scheme, society is created through externalization. It is through the process of objectivation that society becomes a reality *sui generic*, having its own laws and identity. And, through internalization the 'society-creating human agents' become the 'products of society'.

These processes create the world, objectively as well as subjectively. But how do individual human beings learn about the world and behave? Here, for Berger, the process of crucial significance is socialization, which is defined as the process by which society transmits its objectivized systems of knowledge (customs, values, norms) from one generation to the next. Through this process of learning, individuals imbibe the objectivized cultural meanings of a society, and come to identify with these meanings. Berger (1967: 33) says that it is through socialization that the 'taken-for-granted' quality of the society under consideration is internalized. It is not enough that the individual looks at these meanings as 'useful, desirable, and right'. He is expected to consider them as "inevitable, as part and parcel of the universal 'nature of things'", as what is correct and destined. The individual who internalizes these meanings not only possesses them but also represents and expresses them. The chief cultural meanings of a society (and religion is one of them) can be sustained only if they are internalized by most of the members of that society.

12.4   Religion and World-Construction

Berger's concept of religion follows from his understanding of society as a world-building and world-ordering activity. He says that society imposes upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals a meaningful order, for which he uses the term 'nomos'. When we say that society is a world-building enterprise, what we mean is that it is an 'ordering, or nomizing, activity' (1967:28). Berger distinguishes nomos from 'cosmos'; the former refers to the meaningful order that society imposes on its members, whilst the latter means the 'universe', the sphere around men, which is perennially enigmatic to them. All societies are concerned with evolving a relationship between nomos and cosmos.

At this juncture, Berger thinks in terms of a continuum of societies. At one end are those where the socially established nomos has the quality of being undisputed, almost 'taken for granted'. In this case, there occurs a merging between the meanings that the nomos gives and the fundamental meanings that are supposed to be inherent in the cosmos. In these societies, the nomos is regarded as a 'micro-cosmic reflection' of the universe. The fundamental meanings of the cosmos are revealed to people through their

nomos. This state of affairs one finds in simple and traditional societies. Thus, it is unsurprising that, for instance, the king in the traditional Chinese society was believed to have the 'mandate of heaven'. He was the representative of the divine forces on earth.

In complex societies, with the rise of science and technology, and causality of various phenomena being established objectively, there occurs, what Max Weber calls, the 'de-mystification of the universe'. The phenomena that aroused awe and wonderment at one time no more do so. What was a 'mystique' at one time is now very much within the realm of 'scientific thoughts', fully explainable and convincible. But it is not that the entire universe – with all its nuances and oddities – comes within the orbit of the scientific knowledge. In many cases, the stability of the nomos is supposed to derive from 'more powerful sources than the historical efforts of human beings' (Berger 1967: 34). Who and what are these 'powerful sources' that remain scientifically inexplicable and endow stability to society? At this moment, or occasion, Berger thinks, that religion enters into our argument. For Berger, thus, religion has to be seen in the milieu of the relationship between the 'socially constructed order' (i.e., nomos) and the 'fundamental meanings inherent in the universe' (i.e., cosmos).

12.5 Existing Perspectives on Religion

Firstly, Berger distinguishes his study of religion, which is within the framework of sociological theory, from the one that theologians undertake. He states clearly that no theological or anti-theological implications are present in his work. Neither is he proving nor disproving the reality of religion. Nor does he feel an intrinsic necessity of sociological theory to engage in a 'dialogue' with theologians, although it is possible that certain sociological perspectives may be 'relevant' to them (1967: 181). The difference between the two enquiries into the phenomena of religion should always be kept in mind: sociological perspectives on religion are empirically founded and tested, and they do not deal with the truth or falsity of religion. Theological enquiries are non-empirical and normative in orientation.

> **Action and Reflection 12.1**
>
> Point out the relationship between religion and world construction to your friends. Note down their comments in your notebook.

This distinction leads Berger to define religion. He submits that definitions are neither true nor false. They are useful or less so. Each definition of religion has a point to make, has some utility, although it might be based on erroneous assumption. As an example, Berger cites the case of Max Müller's definition, which is: 'religion is a disease of language'. It can be rejected as based on an 'inadequate rationalistic theory of language', but the great service it does is that it tells us that language is a very important component that human beings use in their endeavours of world-building (1967: 177).

Berger is not in agreement with Weber's position that the definition of religion could be postponed till the end of study. This stance or the one of avoiding the definition altogether in a study would make the area of research fuzzy, or one would work with implicit, and not explicit, definition. Weber certainly has an 'implicit' definition of religion, with reference to its 'substance' (or content). But, by contrast to Weber's place, Berger lends support to explication – there must be a properly-framed and thought out definition of any phenomenon under study, notwithstanding its complexity, and religion is no exception.

In comparison to Weber, Berger finds Durkheim's approach to religion 'radically sociological' (1967: 178). To Durkheim's credit are: (1) the definition of religion in terms of sacred things, that is, 'things set apart and forbidden'; (2) the social functionality of religion ('religion binds people in a moral community'); and (3) grasping of religion as a 'social fact', which is to be explained in relationship with the other, preceding, social facts. Berger observes that Weber's 'implicit' definition of religion is substantive in nature. Durkheim also begins with a substantive description of religious phenomena with reference to the dichotomy of sacred and profane, but in the end it becomes a functional definition – religion is what it does, the contribution it makes to the different institutions of society.

Following the tradition of Durkheim, a definition of religion in terms of its social function is in the work of Thomas Luckmann titled *The Invisible Religion* (1967). For him, religion refers to the capacity of human beings to transcend their biological nature by constructing a universe of objective, all-embracing, and morally-binding meanings. As a result, religion becomes not only a social phenomenon (in Durkheim's sense) but also the 'anthropological phenomenon', because it embraces the entire 'non-biological human existence.' Thus, for Luckmann, everything genuinely human is religious, and the non-religious phenomena are those which are grounded in the 'animal nature' of man.

Commenting on these ideas, Berger expresses his disagreement, as we noted earlier, with Weber for not formulating an explicit and operational definition of religion. Although Weber says that the definition would come at the end of his study he was engaged in, he could never reach the end, and so the readers keep waiting for the 'definitional pay-off' (1967: 178). Durkheim was more concerned with the functions of religion, and so the substantive aspects of religion remain rather not so developed. With respect to Luckmann, Berger questions an approach that equates religion with all human activities, with all that is human. Undoubtedly, religion is a 'mode of symbolic self-transcendence', but there are other human activities that have the same quality, yet they are vastly different from religion. For instance, one finds the same quality in modern science, but it would be erroneous to equate it with religion.

Berger looks for a substantive definition of religion, i.e. define religion in terms of its substance, in terms of what it has. He distinguishes it from those approaches that begin with an anthropological foundation of religion – religion is a human characteristic, not found at infra-human level – and also those that look for the functions of religion.

12.6 The Concept of Religion

Berger (1967:34) offers a substantive definition of religion by positing the idea of a sacred cosmos:

Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Put differently, religion is cosmization in a sacred mode.

This definition is derived, Berger says, from the writings of Rodolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. Although Berger refers to Durkheim's distinction, he states clearly that the concept of sacred he uses is from the writings of the scholars on religion from the time of Otto. For him, sacred refers to a 'quality of mysterious and awesome power'. It is other than human beings, and at the same time it is related to them. Sacredness resides in the objects of human experience – thus, this quality is attributed to natural phenomena and objects, to human beings, and to things that men have

produced. There are sacred rocks, sacred clothes, sacred times, sacred tools, sacred spaces, and so on.

Box 12.2 Sacred Objectives

There is a great variety of sacred objects, which differ from one society to another. There are different historical manifestations of the sacred. Furthermore, sacredness is relative: what may be sacred in one setting may not be in the other. But, notwithstanding these cross-cultural differences, all sacred things share certain uniformities. Firstly, sacred is seen as 'sticking out' – as being different – from the normal routines of everyday life. It is conceptualized as 'extraordinary' and 'potentially dangerous'. It can cause harm, but its dangers can be domesticated, through means of ritual supplication or cajoling. Its potency can be harnessed to serve the needs of human life. Sacred is apprehended as a quality different from human beings, but it relates to them in a way in which no other thing does. People confront sacred as an immensely powerful reality other than themselves, which helps their everyday living, at the same time locating their life in a meaningful order.

Like Durkheim, Berger also thinks that the 'dichotomization of reality into sacred and profane spheres, however related, is intrinsic to religious enterprise' (1967: 35-6). The category of profane is negatively defined: it is the 'antonym to sacred' or the 'absence of sacred status'. The idea of 'left-over' may also be noted in the definition of profane: what is not sacred (or 'sticking out' of the normal) is profane. For Durkheim, it may be noted, the activities of everyday, mundane, life constitute the domain of profane, but they can become sacred if they come to be infused with extraordinary powers. The opposite is also true: the sacred objects may lose their power and become commonplace. For Durkheim, sacredness is superimposed on objects, an activity that *conscience collective* (collective consciousness) has carried out historically.

In addition to the dichotomy of sacred and profane, Berger also formulates another dichotomy of sacred and chaos. The sacred emerges out of the chaos, and then confronts it as its opposite, its antithesis. This idea emerges from a reading of a number of myths of human and nature creation. There was utter chaos in the universe before god brought everything under his control, created man and woman, handed over to them the repository of sacred knowledge, and blessed them to lead a happy life for themselves and their posterity forever, provided they followed the divine commandments. If they failed to subscribe to sacred knowledge, they would fall into chaos, and that would be their end. Religion teaches people that there are 'dangerous' powers inherent in sacred objects, which in case of not being treated properly can always withdraw their support and favour. Losing connections with sacred would mean being engulfed by chaos. Religion keeps the terror away. If order is the first (and the foremost) need of human society, the crucial function of religion is its ordering (or 'nomizing') capacity.

12.7 Secularization

One of the points that Berger makes is that the cosmos may not always be considered as sacred in some societies. For example, in modern society, there have been attempts to 'secularize' the cosmos, deprive it of its sacredness. Modern science has played a crucial role in this process. However, Berger thinks that originally all cosmic entities (or cosmoses) had a sacred character: 'Viewed historically, most of man's worlds have been sacred

worlds' (1967:37). It seems to Berger that in all likelihood, sacred was the only way by which human beings could have conceived the cosmos.

Until the 1980s, most social scientists thought that the concept of god was becoming increasingly slim in the modern world. Berger was influential in developing what has come to be known as the 'secularization thesis.' He wrote in his *The Social Reality of Religion* (p.130):

Probably for the first time in history, the religious legitimations of the world have lost their plausibility not only for a few intellectuals and other marginal individuals, but for broad masses of entire societies.

In 1974, he repudiated his own thesis. He wrote in his *Religion in a Revolutionary Society* (1974:16) that at one time, he (and many others) had 'overestimated both the degree and irreversibility of secularization.' In 1998, in an article that appeared in *The Christian Century*, he confessed to having made a mistake in his earlier writings that modernity necessarily led to a decline in religion.

To the secularization thesis, Berger has made two important contributions. First, he strengthened Weber's thesis on increased rationalization of the world – the 'world of white fairies' (gods, demons) gave way to the 'world of white coats' (laboratory-men, scientists). Berger, in his work on Israelite prophets, located the seeds of rationality in the monotheism of the Old Testament. In this way, he lent support to the argument held by Weber (and others, such as Troeltsch, Robert Merton, and Martin) that Judaism, Christianity, and Protestantism inadvertently and ironically contributed to their decline. They did this by simplifying the supernatural, by making god a routine and rational entity, and by stating that the operations of the divine were within the limits of predictability. This permitted the growth of rational thinking, science and technology, and also aided the rise of capitalism. It started creating conditions where most people could think of living godlessly.

Action and Reflection 12.2

Explain the Secularization thesis to your friends. Ask for their comments and note down your findings in a notebook.

Second, promoting the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz, Berger spoke of the impact of the 'pluralization of life-worlds' of people on their belief systems. His thesis was that the rise of pluralism undermines the set of stable beliefs. When a society has multiple beliefs, thoughts and notions, it means that it will not have any set of stable beliefs, since newer and newer 'products of mental work' will keep on surfacing, and also, will become outdated over time. It is a dialectical process. The forces that create plurality go hand-in-hand with that of modernity. Under the combined impact of plurality and modernity, the 'sacred canopy', i.e. the realm of religion, will become a 'less well-established entity, one of precarious existence'. Berger saw an intrinsic link between the processes of modernization and secularization, and what linked them was 'pluralism'.

12.8   The Future of Religion

We noted earlier that since 1974, Berger has given a number of reasons for doubting his initial thesis that modernity undermined religion. He has shown that religion has continued to exist as a strong and potent force, gripping peoples' imagination and ways of life, regardless of the rise of modernity, science and technology, capitalism, and rational thinking. He has offered the following reasons to revise his confidence in the secularization thesis:

1) There is a growth of conservative and evangelical churches in the United States of America.

2) There is a decline of liberal churches.

3) There is a persistence of interest in religion (if not church-going) in other Western societies.

4) There is a vitality of religion in other parts of the world.

Although Berger was criticized for viewing the world as having a resurgence of religion, he has successfully defended his thesis all these years. The basic debate has been that some have seen a necessary relationship between modernization and secularization – i.e., modernization leads to a decline in the hold of religion on society – whilst others are skeptical of such a link.

Berger focuses attention on the examination of religion in a given context, since what is true of one region may not for the other. What is happening to religion in, for example, the Middle East, may not apply to the South Asian societies. Both in the United States and Europe, there is what has come to be known as the 'individualization of religion', which means that the 'rationality of religion' is for the individual, who emerges either as a 'believer' or an 'atheist'. Moreover, religion has lost most of its collective functions. The situation in this part of the world is what Robert Wuthnow calls a 'patchwork religion' or what Danièle Hervieu-Léger has described as *bricolage*, using a term from Claude Lévi-Strauss (c.f. Berger 2001:194), which would roughly mean some of a collage, a coexistence of several things. In this context, the meaning is that there are varieties of religious beliefs and experiences, and a continuum from staunchest and rabid believers to extremely rational and critical non-believers.

However, the difference between the United States and Europe is that the Americans continue to go to church and very often express their traditional beliefs. Almost forty million of them call themselves 'born-again Christians'. One does not come across these things in Europe, but here also, churches continue to play an important role in society, despite the act that church attendance has reduced and people do not profess their official creed. This is a phenomenon which Grace Davie (2001) calls 'belonging without believing.'

By contrast, rest of the world is, Berger (2001:194) writes, 'full of massive religious explosions.' He has also noted that 'some of the most impressive religious upsurges are occurring in relatively modernized milieus (such as militant Islamism and the remarkable expansion of Pentecostalism)' (2001:194). This should not be interpreted as implying that the phenomenon of secularization does not exist. The point to remember here is that its structure and pattern varies from one part of the world to the other. Incidentally, the version of secularization that exists in Europe is termed Eurosecularity. Berger asserts that we should not assume that secularization wherever it exists is a 'normal concomitant of modernity.' Today, Berger's position is that it is pluralism which is undermining the traditional beliefs and practices. In times to come, religion will continue to have its hold on society, but it will not be one, unified, monolithic religion. Rather, it will be 'religion with pluralism'.

12.9 Conclusion

Berger has made a tremendous impact in the sociology of religion. He has contributed to debates in the domains of the sociological nature of religious commitment, religious changes in modern times, the relationship between

religious and economic institutions, secularization thesis and its revision, the Biblical studies, and the interface between theology and sociology. Woodhead (2001) writes that though Berger's career began four decades ago (his first book appeared in 1961), it is now that some of the themes on which he wrote earlier have been taken up into the mainstream of the sociology of religion. An outstanding example is of the concept of de-secularization, on which Berger started writing in 1977, which is now at the centre of the debate whether the world is becoming increasingly 'godless' or 'god-full'. Similarly, Berger has been interested in religion and globalization, a topic that has become popular in the last ten years or so. His concept of the 'pluralization of life-worlds' has also been picked up for further analysis. In fact, some scholars think that it provides a 'new paradigm' for understanding the contemporary world.

12.10 Further Reading

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