

## **PETER L. BERGER: FAREWELL TO A GREAT “ACCIDENTAL” SOCIOLOGIST**

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The passing away of Professor Peter L. Berger on June 27 is a great loss for the world of social sciences. Berger built his name and reputation in the academic sphere, primarily thanks to his analyses on place and the role of religion in the modern world. Indeed, his horizon was far beyond the mentioned analyses. Berger first prepared for life through studies of theology with the ambition of becoming a Lutheran priest. However, the coincidences that led to his arrival in the United States as an Austrian migrant played a part in his academic career. His intention was to build on his foundation in theology, but instead he studied sociology. Therefore, he defined himself as an “accidental sociologist” in his memoir *Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist* (2011).

Despite this modesty, Berger’s sociological studies and analyses were by no means coincidental and represent the summit of academic awareness. His areas of interest provide clear evidence of this fact. His PhD thesis (1952) on the Bahā’ī Movement would eventually make him one of the luminaries in the sociology of religion. The subtitle of his thesis, *A Contribution to the Sociology of Religion*, heralded his upcoming specialty. Nevertheless, Berger generally constituted his sociological perspective around the sociology of knowledge and made use of this perspective to comprehend the phenomenon of religion.

This perspective on social reality made Berger’s analyses different from others, but there are other factors to take into account. Berger was deeply influenced by the phenomenological approach of Alfred

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Schutz, another Austrian migrant to the United States. This influence is obvious in his *Invitation to Sociology* as well as in *The Social Construction of Reality*, which he wrote together with Thomas Luckmann. Berger did not deny Schutz's influence; nonetheless, in an interview with Charles T. Mathewes (2006), he defined himself as an "Orthodox Weberian." At the same time, his genuine approach can be called "Humanistic Sociology." Indeed, Berger considered society a human product and perceived it as an objective reality that is within man and in which man is. This was not the only "humanistic" aspect of Berger's sociology. His quest for humanistic content exceeded an academic approach and language, so much so that he wrote two novels on the subject: *The Enclaves* (which Berger wrote under a pseudonym) is about a master-slave relationship that recalls Hegel, whereas *Protocol of a Damnation* is the account of the daily life of a group and points out aspects of daily life that go beyond natural reality.

His academic studies and novels provide hints of the synthesis between theology and sociology that Berger sought in an implicit or explicit manner depending on the occasion. This search for synthesis is, obviously, not "coincidental;" indeed, it is the relation between religion, and thus secularism, and modernism. This is a theme that Berger studied and attempted to understand throughout his life. Therefore, he discussed religion as a "sacred canopy" that corresponds to man's search for meaning in a "disenchanted" world. He claimed that with modernism, society would leave this sacred canopy for secularity.

However, Berger noted that the line from religion to modernization does not proceed on a linear axis as we move away from theology and draw near sociology. Thus, he began to rethink the phenomenon of *secularization*, which represents this straight line, and concluded that a crisis of meaning arises from secularism. In the paper "Secularism in Retreat" (Berger 1996), he abandons the concept of linear secularization. Granting Europe an exceptional place in this regard, he explains the rise in religious movements in most of the world as a crisis of secularism.

*Pluralism* is Berger's recommendation to overcome this crisis. According to Berger, as stated in an interview in 2016, the existence of pluralist lifestyles should please Christians. In his opinion, pluralism will be functional in surpassing the imposition of the so-called secular lifestyle of modernity as well as in preventing fundamentalist religious approaches. A deep-thinking theologian-sociologist, Berger states in

the same interview the following to those who deliberately identify Islam with “fundamentalism:”

Islam is not ISIS. Every religion can become murderous—certainly Christianity did, God knows. So did all the others. Buddhists think they are the religion of peace, but look what is happening in Sri Lanka and Burma. Islam, however, at its core from the beginning, emphasized the greatness, justice, and compassion of God (Hovorun and Arida 2016, 21).

Given the limits of this article, we cannot comprehensively discuss all of Berger’s studies and thoughts, his contributions to sociology and theology, or even criticisms of him. Berger left a great academic legacy for the entire Western and non-Western community of social studies. For those who are willing to share his legacy, it is important to remember two criteria. First, Berger’s legacy is based on a “humanistic” approach; therefore, it excludes any dehumanized social analysis. Second, an anthropocentric approach and understanding finds ridiculous the artificial solemnity and arrogance worn for the sake of “scientific” appearance in analysis, recommendation, and style. After all, we are talking about the legacy of a personality who never refrained from joking in his accounts of social incidents and who, indeed, wrote a book titled *Redeeming Laughter*.

His teachings and the problems that he urged us to rethink may enable us to honor this late sociologist in a “non-accidental,” rational manner. Peter L. Berger is more than worthy of such effort. May he rest in peace.

## REFERENCES

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