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Peter L. Berger's Early Conception of Agency: Exposition and Evaluation

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

by

James Greene

May 2010

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motifs

ABSTRACT

Peter L. Berger's Early Conception of Agency: Exposition and Evaluation

by

James Greene

Peter L. Berger's conception of agency in his earliest writings (c.1954 – 1960) is logically and empirically inadequate. At the root of this inadequacy is an idealism that prevents him from providing a compelling account of actual empirical agency. Chapter 1 asserts that Berger's earlier works warrant analysis. Chapter 2 discusses Berger's earliest influences, particularly Max Weber and The Swedish Lund School of motif research. Chapter 3 identifies a unique commitment to Christian Humanism at the base of Berger's conception of agency. Chapter 4 clarifies how Berger's Christian humanism interacts with his Weberian, and Parsonian-inspired functional analysis of the American religious establishment. The thesis concludes (Chapter 5) by identifying more specifically how and why Berger's Christian humanism undermines his attempt to empirically ground human agency.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Research Problem

The precise nature of the agency-structure relationship remains a contentious issue in contemporary sociological thought.¹ The problem of agency may be formulated as: How shall we understand the possibility of individual human autonomy and its relation to a complex modern industrial society? This thesis focuses on how the eminent sociologist and theologian Peter L. Berger tries to answer that question. Specifically, this thesis claims Berger's earliest formulation of conceptions of agency-structure relations evident in his major published writings c. 1954-1961 is theoretically flawed. Berger's religious and spiritual *a priori* assumptions prevent his theoretical system from grounding an empirically discernable agency. The following chapters identify how Berger's sociological and theological commitments regarding this spiritual immediacy leads him to necessarily focus on only those features of human society that are radically contingent. Ironically, in the end Berger's idealism leads to an abstractly conceived social structure whose convictions of production also escape the agent's own powers and capacities.

Literature Review

Peter L. Berger's contributions to debates over "secularization" (See e.g. Harvey 1973; Hadden 1987; Tschannen 1991; Yamane 1997; Stark 1999; Swatos Jr. et. al. 1999; Weigel and Berger 1999; Stark and Finke 2000; Norris and Inghart 2004; Beckford and Demerath 2007; Chistiano et. al. 2008), religious pluralization (See e.g. Stark et. al. 1995; Weigel and Berger 1999; Berger 2001; Chaves and Gorski. 2001; Voas et. al. 2002), and religious fundamentalism

¹ For a detailed explication of the definition of "agency" see e.g. Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische. 1998. "What Is Agency?" *The American Journal of Sociology*, 103 (4): 962-1023.

(Wiegel and Berger 1999; Berger 2010) are relatively well-known. Scholars generally focus on his later writing, and have not to date investigated his earliest conception of agency.² A few authors have contributed to this debate, however.

Gary Dorrien (2001) specifically addresses Berger's theological influences and political interests, focusing on the early 1960s in which Berger's ethical and moral focus is American Christianity and is related to a "semi-Kierkegaardian attack on the triumph of the therapeutic in the churches" (28). Dorrien further critiques Berger's theology as neo-conservatively motivated. Bernice Martin (2001) disagrees with Dorrien, however, and regards Berger's critique as both accurate and 'prophetic.'

Nicholas Abercrombie (1986) specifically describes Berger's intellectual exploration of agency and autonomy as refreshingly distinct from those various sociologists who have tried to "rescue the hidden individual dimension but have failed to do so ending in at the level of structural" (11). Abercrombie further notes that Talcott Parsons's functionalist system dominated the sociological discipline, and though the intellectual climate of the 1960s thirsted for a more robust concept of agency, "this debate like others was pitched at the level of social structure and tended to ignore the level of individual agency" (ibid., 11). Berger's own synthesis "generat[ed] interest in a whole range of newer perspectives from phenomenology to Weber's theory of action" (ibid., 11-12). Abercrombie's analysis however addresses a later Bergerian social constructionism in the period 1963 to 1970s, one in which Berger's notion of agency is informed by the Schützian concepts of the life-world. During this period, Berger uses the life-world concept as a conceptual "workshop for human meaning" (Ahern 1999: 62-71). Van A. Harvey

² For commentaries focused on Berger's general theoretical career see e.g. Ahern 1999; Ainlay 1986; Hunter, and Woodhead et. al. 2002; Fernandez 2003; Wuthnow et. al. 1984.

(1973) concludes regarding his analysis of Berger's most well known book *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) that Berger presents "human nature [as] almost entirely a cultural product...[and][o]n this assumption, it is difficult to speak of human nature at all" (90).

Methodology

The research design for this study consists of a conceptual-theoretical analysis of Peter L. Berger's earliest conception of agency c.1954 to 1961. The following primary writings are analyzed: *From Sect to Church: A Sociological Interpretation of the Baha'i Movement*. (1954a), "The Sociological Study of Sectarianism." ([1954] 1984), "Sectarianism and Religious Sociation." (1958), "Camus, Bonhöffer, and the World Come of Age." (1959), "The Problem of Christian Community in Modern Society" (1960), *The Precarious Vision: A Sociologist Looks at Social Fictions and Christian Faith* (1961a), and *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies: Christian Commitment and the Religious Establishment in America* (1961b).

CHAPTER 2

CONCEIVING AGENCY IN SECT AND CHURCH: MAX WEBER AND RELIGIOUS MOTIF RESEARCH

Peter L. Berger's (1954a; [1954b] 1984; 1958) theory of agency begins with a fairly orthodox reliance on Max Weber and a Swedish school of religious studies. His dissertation modifies and expands on Weber's church and sect typologies, particularly his analysis of the reciprocal relation between 'church' and 'sect' and the undercurrent and/or driving energy-force associated with 'charisma.' Berger also further develops a methodology pioneered by the Swedish School of motif research to better understand relations of sect and church.³ Unlike later writings, in these earliest formulations Berger remains cautiously sociological and his idealistic premise is significantly subdued.

Amending Max Weber's Concepts

From Weber's own point of view, it is necessary to get to the inner meanings behind these phenomena. And since these inner meanings are religious, a definition is needed that will take the specific religious differentiation into account⁴

Church-Sect Typology

According to Berger, most of the post-Weberian studies relating to sects and churches were limited to Germanic and European regions of the world and many Weberian-inspired

³ See e.g. Gustav Aulén. [1923] (1973). *The Faith of the Christian Church*. Trans. E. H. Wahlstrom, Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Anders Nygrén. [1932] (1982). *Agape & Eros*. Trans. P. S. Watson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Berger [1954b] 1984: 370-371.

scholars erroneously conceive sect and church as radically divergent.⁵ In contrast, Berger offers his own rendering of Weber's concepts. Citing Weber, he asserts that church and sect are 'political institutions that exercise authority and force upon the laity' ([1954b] 1984: 368).⁶ A sect is a type of organization (*Verband*) characterized by the fact that it is voluntarily joined by individuals and therefore coercion and force are rarely exercised. A church, as a type of institutionalized ruling organization (*Herrschaftsverband*), however, is "a political institution with a normative order...which maintain[s] its order by psychological force over a continuing period of time...granting and withholding sacramental goods" (ibid., 368).⁷

Berger claims that the Weberian usage of sect is less than adequate, possibly misinterpreted, and illogical.⁸ Some scholars consider sect literally as a protest, the root word of Protestantism, and a type of segregated rebellious group that secedes from the church such as the Puritans, Lutherans, Baptists, and many early Christian movements. Berger disagrees however. First, this conception of sect is an inaccurate description in the American case—not to mention countermovements and other occurrences even *within* the Catholic church. For example, in America it would be erroneous to name "present-day Baptists as a sect" as they have become one of the largest political organizations in America ([1954b] 1984: 370). Second, Christian

⁵ Berger goes into detail identifying the various flaws he alleges exist in Weberian scholarship on the concepts church and sect. See, e.g. Berger [1954b] 1984. "The Sociological Study of Sectarianism." *Social Research*, 51(1-2): 367-385.

⁶ Berger is referencing the incomplete fragments in Max Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* [Economy and Society] (Tubingen 1947, vol. 1, p. 29).

⁷ It is important to note Berger relies on earlier pre-critical German texts of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* rather than the modern English renderings. Nevertheless, it is Berger's Weber that is key and therefore binding.

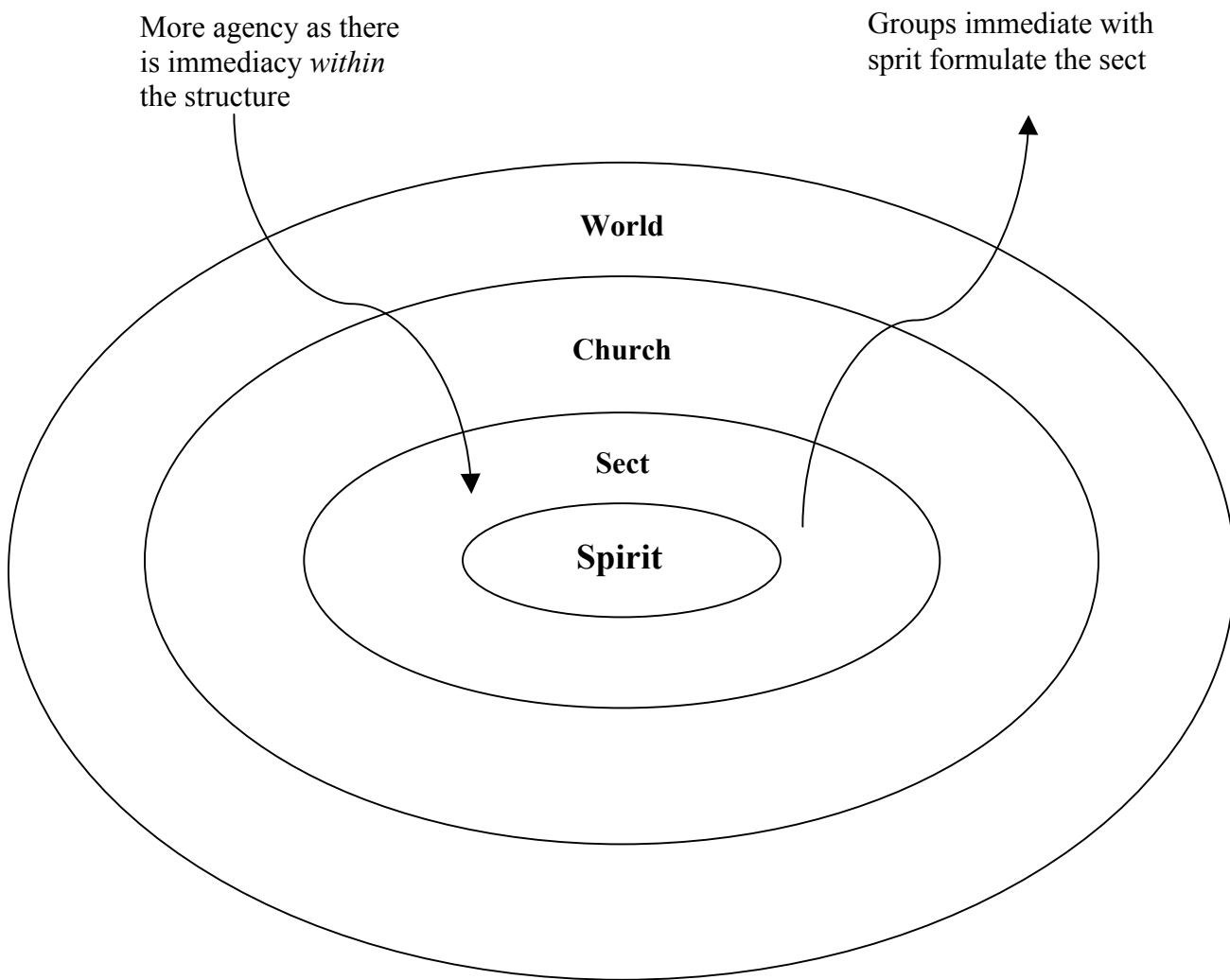
⁸ He states: "Although it is true that churches, by and large, possess a hierocratical [sic] order and exercise hierocratical [sic] force on all within their power, while sects possess no such order and recruit themselves from those who freely respond to a certain religious experience, we must pry deeper into the nature of both these phenomena in order to grasp them fully. From Weber's own point of view, it is necessary to get to the inner meanings behind these phenomena. And since these inner meanings are religious, a definition is needed that will take the specific religious differentiation into account" ([1954b] 1984: 370-371).

communities and denominations also fall into the category of sect; yet these groups formulated large, bureaucratic church structures rather quickly.

The ‘acute diffusion’ of the Baha’i movement within the Western modern world presents Berger with empirical clues as to the reconfiguration of church and sect typologies in America. Based on his analysis of this movement, Berger (1954a) concludes that sectarian movements have the ability to be much more mobile and less constricted than churches. The unique characteristics displayed in the Baha’i groups show transference from Islamic to Christian contexts due their social locality within America and therefore ‘Western consciousness’ (179).

The Ecology of the Sacred and Charisma

The Baha’i movement also provides Berger an opportunity to observe the ‘inner meanings’ of religious groups in regards to space, which Berger calls an “ecology of the sacred” (Berger [1954]1984: 375). Figure 1 below illustrates immediate versus mediated agency in Berger’s early religious theory.



(Berger 1954a; [1954b] 1984; as modified)

Figure 1 Peter Berger's Ecology of the Sacred: Immediate v Mediated Spirituality

The sectarian experience for Berger is, in contrast to Weber, *not* based on voluntarism or compulsion in membership but rather the experienced immediacy or mediation of spirit conceived as God's gifted powers. Sectarian groupings formulate *within* the church, as well as without. These sectarian groups experience an immediacy of spirit rather than the church as a

structure “mediating between spirit and the world” (ibid., 376).⁹ Closer proximity to immediate *spirit*—for highly committed church members *and* others in smaller bodies of voluntary adherents—renders religious behavior as deeply spiritual/meaningful within the structure, thus moving further from a spiritless world mediation. It is the criterion of proximity then that leads Berger to define sect “as a religious grouping based on the belief that *the spirit is immediately present*. And the church, on the other hand, may be defined as a religious grouping based on the belief that *the spirit is remote*” (ibid., 374).

Sect is distinguishable from church “for it comes from the inner logic of social-religious groupings themselves” (Berger [1954] 1984: 368) and is also is an “island formation” that is distinguished from society as “essentially subjective, unique, and transcendent” (ibid., 374). Social agents themselves sustain maneuverability and assert their subjectivity within the very group in which they are derived—the church. A church can be conceptually separated as an “individualistic, free-flowing spirituality” (Berger 1954a:149) or not, depending on the church grouping and its relation to the world; sect can either be “transitory” or “lasting” depending on (for both church and sect) the experienced immediacy of *spirit*. The positively institutionalized structures within churches are most likely the cause for the remoteness of *spirit* and its mediation with world (ibid., 152), and indeed, the “mediating between the spirit and the world” (Berger [1954] 1984: 376).

Sectarian agency concerns the “religious object as such” (i.e. salvific-oriented belief and action) and is “subject in action” (i.e. God’s objectification as spiritual grace) but must occur

⁹ He states: “By spirit is meant the religious object as such, that object which will always, of course, appear to faith as a subject [i.e. God, Christ] in action. The spirit may be said, then, to create the religious experience in which man encounters that which is sacred... The spirit manifests itself to man in a way that can generally be determined geographically, as it were—in a human being or animal, in certain objects, in a specific holy place sometimes natural and sometimes artificially created” (Berger [1954b] 1984: 374-375).

within space, time, and around a spiritual locality (Berger 1954a: 152-153). Most sect/church typologies, Berger asserts, lack concepts that permit a dynamic analysis of those processes by which sects transform over time. (Berger [1954b] 1984) explains:

...it becomes clear that [these relationships between church, sect, spirit, and world] are anything but static in character. In terms of graphic representation, the center may shift at any moment. The spirit blows where it wills, and at anytime may manifest itself anew in the middle of what used to be the world, thus creating a new system of relations. And, significantly, the spirit may also manifest itself anew within the old and set structure of a church, setting in motion right there the explosive dynamic of sectarianism (ibid., 376).

Thus we are led to a discussion of the Weberian concept known as ‘charisma.’

Charisma is a force that imbues religious leaders, various groups, or a larger legal setting. Distinct to the church, sectarian charisma “is attached to the religious leader” (Berger [1954] 1984: 369). He argues that charisma and agency are in a dynamic interplay. “Charisma represents the sudden eruption into history of quite new forces, often linked to quite new ideas” (Berger 1963: 949).¹⁰ In order to accomplish such an analysis of *spirit*, Berger employs the methodology of the Swedish School of motif research.

The Swedish School, Religious Motifs and Historically Tracing Agency

The Swedish School and Religious Motif Research

Berger further deepens his conception of agency by appropriating and modifying a particular body of thought originating in Sweden known as ‘motif research.’¹¹ A religious motif

¹⁰ See also how charisma and its ‘routinization’ can be detected in Israelite prophecy thus amending another portion of Weberian sociology (e.g. Peter L. Berger 1963a. “Charisma and Religious Innovation: The Social Location of Israelite Prophecy.” *American Sociological Review*, 28(6): 940-950.)

¹¹ He states: “We are indebted for our concept of the religious motif to the so-called Lund school of Swedish theology, especially the work of Anders Nygrén and Gustav Aulén. The Swedish theologians have been interested in tracing certain dominant motifs throughout Christian history. In this approach they have concerned themselves with the contents of Christian faith rather than with theological contents proper, in accordance with their view that theology was not a normative science, but an objective scientific analysis of the contents of faith” (1954a: 159). See e.g. Aulén, Gustav. [1923] (1973). *The Faith of the Christian Church*. Trans. E. H. Wahlstrom, Philadelphia:

is defined as a “specific pattern (gestalt if you wish) of religious experience that can be traced in [its] historical development” (Berger: 1954a: 159). An adaptation of Berger’s ([1954b] 1984) motif typology for his analysis of the Baha’i movement is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 Peter L. Berger’s Sectarian Motifs

Type	Motif	Attitude Toward World
Enthusiastic: An Experience To Be Lived		
Revivalist Pentecostal	“Fire falling from Heaven”	World saving
Pietist Holiness	“Follow the gleam”	World avoiding
Prophetic: A Message To Be Proclaimed		
Chiliastic	“The Lord is coming”	World warning
Legalistic	“A new order”	World conquering
Gnostic: A Secret To Be Divulged		
Oriental	“Wisdom from the East”	World irrelevant
New Thought	“Powers in the soul”	World irrelevant
Spiritist	“Voices from beyond”	World irrelevant

(Berger [1954b] 1984: 379; as modified)

Religious groupings exhibit three general motifs that undergo a reciprocally determined development. These motifs are flexible: they can proceed or succeed one another; a religious

Fortress Press. Nygrén, Anders. [1932] (1982). *Agape & Eros*. Trans. P. S. Watson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

grouping can simultaneously contain elements of each; each represents a phase of ‘routinization,’ where routinization is, for Weber the historical, rational ordering process into traditional or legal institutions over time (1954a: 149, 170). For example, in his analysis of the Baha’i movement two fundamental motifs are manifest: prophetic and gnostic (Berger 1954a: 164). The prophetic motif begins as chiliastic, a fullness of agency, spiritual immediacy, and centered on a charismatic leader. The legalistic motif involves a disappearance of a religiously charismatic leadership. Eventually, the motif assumes an ecclesiastical or organized church form. The gnostic motif also routinizes over time as “monism may develop into complete mysticism and pantheism, or it may become secularized in a naturalistic conception. The latter is what happened in the Baha’i case” (Berger: 1954a: 165). The chiliastic motif can initially be prophetic, but due to routinization it can develop into a legalistic motif and later an ecclesia.

The relationship between the sect and the world is a complex one. We can say, however, that a change in pressure takes place as the process of “routinization” goes on...the pressures would seem strongest in the direction from the religious to the social, that is, the religious motif largely determines the inner social structure of the sect, as we have described. Later, however, as the spirit recedes into remoteness and the sect hardens, as it were into ecclesiastical forms, the pressures predominate in the other direction, from the social to the religious, as the church makes its peace with the world and is invaded with the latter’s social realities, norms, institutions (ibid., 157).

In sum, for Berger, a “fundamental motif” remains within and undergirds the patterning of religious groups, including every church structure that, on the surface, appears overly formalized and fixed. The motif both modulates and reconfigures the structure in question. Figure 2 portray the changes in motif pressures over time.

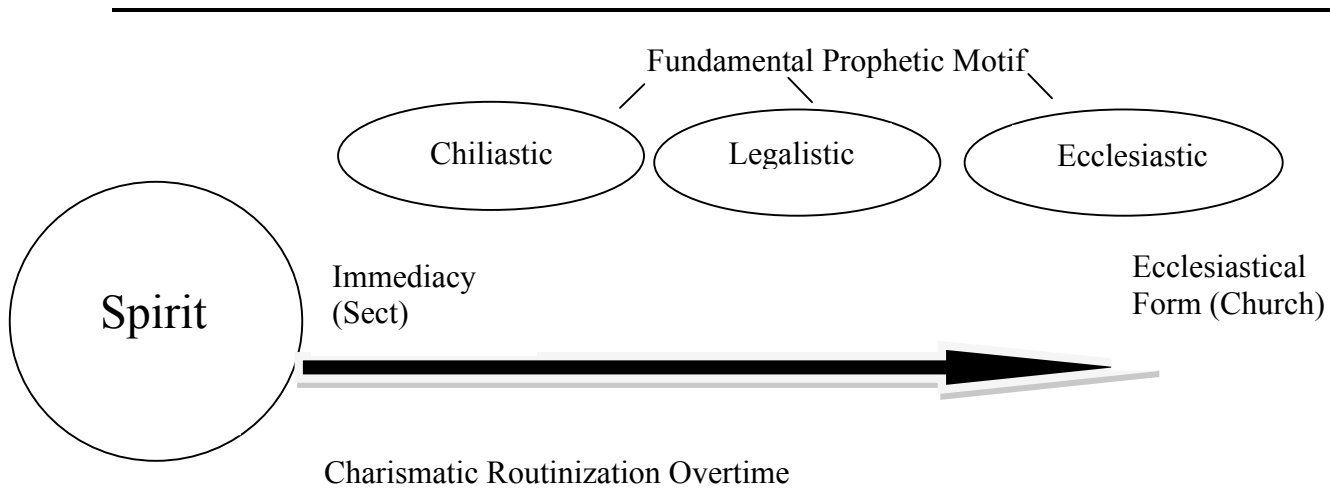


Figure 2 Changes in Motif Pressures

Berger's description of sectarian dynamics due to motif pressures is followed by his assessment of what is called a "meaning system."

Conversion, Alternation, and Meaning Systems

It is one system among many and only within it exists the illusion of universal communication. The meaning systems that spring up anew all around us bear the character of sectarian religion. It is thus no accident that sectarianism proper has found a fertile field.¹²

The fundamental motifs project outwardly and combine to structure a 'meaning system.' An individual's meaning system can either constrain or enable agency. Traditional meaning systems can be taken advantage of by a religious authority to restrict agency. Or an individual may co-exist among many cultures and therefore navigate "contradictory meaning systems" arising in the "religious market" that sets up pluralistic situations in which sectarian groups thrive. The phenomenon of conversion in certain situations creates a possibility that

¹² Berger 1954a: 183.

“communication becomes impossible” due to not having a “common frame of reference” (Berger 1954a: 182). “Our age is an age of conversion,” Berger claims, and “[c]onversion has taken the place of communication, the ‘leap’ replaces reason and argument” (ibid., 182).

Alternation, rather than a ‘leap of faith’ (i.e. conversion), a ‘passing from one to another meaning system’ for Berger replaces reason and argumentation. Alternation, in contrast, is *not* a leap but rather a negotiating of meaning systems. Conversion occurs when a totalizing meaning system is ecologically present; alternation occurs when greater freedom and movement exists in and between meaning systems. According to Berger, “[a] seedbed of sectarianism” exists when competing meaning systems, due to the plural market situation of the modern world, facilitates conversions. Berger’s observation of the Baha’i movement leads him to conclude that while it is possible to understand alternation theoretically, as seen in his motif research, switching or alternating back and forth from one meaning system to another is ‘psychologically improbable’ to ascertain empirically (ibid., 182-183).

CHAPTER 3

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, CHRISTIAN HUMANISM, AND THE CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL FICTIONS: THE SOCIAL WORLD AS ALIBI

Berger's idealistic conception of agency and agency-structure relations first finds expression in his first major book, *The Precarious Vision* (1961a). Two core bases for a conception of human agency are offered: one that uses various social psychological insights to 'debunk' societal fictions, but far more tellingly, a second grounded in a type of Christian humanism that demands radical moral freedom as the individual faces up to his or her own individual existence.¹³ In terms of the latter, the question becomes: How is a genuine Christian authenticity possible in the modern world?

The Social Psychological Structure of Fictions

The Problem with Alternation and Meaning Systems

Berger (1961a) discovers a curious problem when he met adherents of the Baha'i faith for interviews.¹⁴ Adherents became fascinated by the vast amount of knowledge that he had acquired of their faith and were under the impression that Berger himself was a believer. After Berger informed members of the movement that he was in fact not a believer the adherents became

¹³ From 1959 to 1961, Berger authors several essays, on Christianity that address elements of the notion of freedom and liberation from an 'inauthentic' society. This chapter addresses two essays: a two-part piece published April 8th and 15th, 1959 for *The Christian Century* titled, "Camus, Bonhöffer, and the World Come of Age."

¹⁴ Berger (1961a: 124): "The adherents of a sect, upon finding out that the writer had some knowledge of its history and tenets, immediately assumed that he was a believer. When he identified himself as a nonbeliever, it was as if the previous information about his knowledge of sectarian lore had been wiped out from their memory. They now began to tell him the simplest, most commonly known facts about the sect in question. While this mechanism cannot be called apologetics, it is carried by the same defensive reaction" (Berger: 1961a: 124). Berger also tells this story in a recent autobiographical account of his writing and accomplishments in his *Adventures with Sociology – An "Ego-history"* (2009).

awkwardly surprised and quickly began to challenge Berger's expertise. From this he realized that techniques of 'alternation prevention' are actually quite elaborate. They consist of practical techniques, rituals, confessions, theological elaboration and so forth, which are formulated to deal with doubt, fear, and uncertainty. These systemizations have become vastly more complicated over time through organized procedures (ibid., 125).

Berger asserts that individuals and groups will go to great lengths to prevent exit from a meaning system. "Whatever happens, the believer must be prevented from what we have called 'alternating' that is, prevented from an ecstasy or conversion which will transport him outside the system, even for a moment of intellectual inspection" (Berger 1961a: 125). Conversion, for example, provides new possibilities of agency because one alternates and switches one's world view (*Weltanschauung*). Though this *gestalt* offers a clue to discovering agency, in fact generally an individual remains permanently submerged in a meaning system. How does what is in fact unreal—a subjective meaning system—become overwhelmingly real? In what follows Berger's explication of this unique process is described.

The World-Taken-For-Granted

Berger's (1961a) social psychological analysis of the fictive nature of social reality begins with an analysis of a Schützian notion of 'the world taken-for-granted,' i.e. individuals do not recognize their productive role in creating, they just presume a world already made. "For most of us, as we grow up and learn to live in society, its forms take on the appearance of structures as self-evident and as solid as those of the natural cosmos" (ibid., 10). This form of the taken-for-granted consciousness creates familiarity, one that does not require thought or reflection.

Yet this consciousness of what Alfred Schuetz [sic] has called the "world taken for granted" is not of such solidity that it cannot be breached. When such a breach

occurs the world is transformed, takes on new dimensions and colors. If the breach occurs suddenly it marks the day after which life will never be the same again (ibid., 10-11).

A breach occurs when consciousness *reflects* on reality. If this reflection turns to self-reflection or introspection, the agent's 'vision' of the world then has the potential to undermine fictitious constraints. Despite the *apparent* reality of fictions, they still have *real* social consequence.

Dramatic Play and Precariousness

Berger conceives individuals as actors enacting a fictional play rooted in taken-for-granted consciousness thereby not realizing its fictitiousness.¹⁵ When the taken-for-granted world consciousness is breached, precariousness arises in feelings of uncertainty. This breach in the taken-for-granted world then forces an actor to realize his or her position in the play. Given genuine reflection, the actor now sees the play as a masquerade.¹⁶ The breach occurs when someone interrupts the game and calls into question the entirety of its fictitiousness. At that point actors step outside of the 'play form' by no longer adhering to the 'script.' For example, consider a Christian armed for a theological discussion on the "continuum of the sanctified, the saved, the lukewarm, and the scoffers" (Berger 1961a: 70). Imagine then that the Christian is then informed that the person to be saved is a Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim. The taken-for-granted at that

¹⁵ Berger (1961a) explains that individuals interacting in the 'play form' literally resemble that of playing a game. They go through their roles, their everyday life, routines, and procedures without reflection (Berger 1961a: 71 also see e.g. Simmel [1908] 1950: 48). Erving Goffman's notion of 'the stage' further allows Berger to expand this notion of the 'taken-for-granted' social reality. Berger (1961a) especially traces his notion of dramatic play as society to J. Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (see e.g. Berger 1961a: 233). Berger (2009) also discusses the long lasting influence of his teacher Albert Solomon who rather enjoyed teaching sociological courses based on reading French novels of Honoré de Balzac.

¹⁶ Berger (1961a): "We may conclude with a picture. If we combine the notion of determination with that of drama we arrive at a provocative vision—that of a puppet theater. And thus we perceive men running about to and fro on the stage, going through the motions of the play—all the time with keys turning slowly and predictably in their backs. But there is one decisive difference between the puppets of society, but with a strange, almost sinister capacity. For we can stop in our tracks, turn around and look over our shoulders—and perceive the keys turning in our backs. This act of consciousness is the first step into freedom. That this act is a possibility is the decisive justification of the social-scientific enterprise" (66).

moment is breached and causes reflection. While this particular breach did not radically disrupt the social game, other extreme cases can call into question the entirety of society itself.

In another example Berger (1961a) forces the breach to an extreme through his vivid description of how WWII European aerial bombings radically disrupted human routines.¹⁷ For example, walking or jogging down a street which is ordinarily an everyday routine. Yet suddenly one's awareness of a street, house, traffic sign, sidewalk, or cars swerving on the road is now radically ruptured. This 'breach' in everyday consciousness arises from the display of exploding buildings, scattered rubble, people screaming, crying, yelling, and the breakout of mass hysteria. The agent is ripped from a mode of thought presuming a mere façade of the 'taken-for-granted' reality. Once presumed, it is now called into question. Insecure feelings at best, and shock, horror, or trauma at worst now flood an agent's consciousness. Before such a breach, the street was not an object of reflection but was assumed as the purely 'taken-for-granted.'

The Functioning Fiction

Berger (1961a) proposes that the sociological consciousness is intrinsically based in reflective premises that empower individuals with the freedom to call into question society's apparent 'givenness.' "What characterizes this perspective more than anything else is the manner in which it transforms a world which we are taught to take for granted into one that is very questionable indeed" (ibid., 9). The sociological consciousness conclusively shows that society is a stage that is far from sturdy. First, Berger is clear in stating that 'society' is not a fiction. Society, Berger states, may be "viewed as a whole, a system of assumptions, conventions, and procedures shared by a group of human beings" (ibid., 104). It is also the case, as sociological

¹⁷ Peter Berger was born in Vienna March 17, 1929, grew up during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and emigrated to New York City in 1946. One can only imagine the horrors he experienced first-hand.

functionalism presumes, “most of the time, [persons] will act in such a way that the play can go on” (ibid., 104).¹⁸ In the main, people *do* follow their roles and participate in day-to-day activities that do not disrupt the stage nor instigate its collapse. However, a deeper social psychological view reveals what in general sociological functionalism conceals: the stability of society is actually rooted in the subjective and collective *adherence* to learned and internalized roles.

George Herbert Mead, for example, explains that societal roles are internalized within consciousness in the earliest moments of socialization: “In the process of socialization the value structure of society becomes the inner value structure of the individual conscience...society no longer just confronts the child as external reality but has become part and parcel of his inner self” (Berger: 1961a: 105). Every society universally requires this process for its continuation as the “purpose of social control is to keep society going despite the occasional foibles and iniquities of its membership” (ibid., 105). The internalization of roles can sometimes be regarded as an “invisible cop sitting squarely in the middle of their heads” (ibid., 105).¹⁹ Society thus comprises actors in the taken-for-granted mode, attached to roles ‘constructing projects toward the future’ and perpetuating their own submersion in these roles (ibid., 52). ‘Society’ as a complete object is finally erected as the ultimate collection and webs of meaning systems arising in and attached to roles. The individual *appears* therefore totally assimilated to and submerged in social structure devoid of agency.

¹⁸ See especially (1961a Chapter 3, and Chapter 6) for Berger’s examination of and borrowings from several important thinkers such as Ralph Linton, George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, William James, Robert Merton, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud and Talcott Parsons.

¹⁹ This argument represents a synthesis of Mead’s notions with those of Edward Alsworth Ross, Sigmund Freud, and Talcott Parsons.

Religion, a uniquely powerful subset of this institutional combine, for Berger, is the epitome of such control. Berger offers witty examples, funny scenarios, stories, historical anecdotes, and a wide-ranging discussion of how unreflective agents reproduce social fictions without awareness of their own genuine powers, and as facets of a fictional conjuring such phenomena as capital punishment, law, marriage, power, politics, religion, norms, routines, and rituals. Such apparently objective facts as ‘society,’ ‘roles,’ and ‘functions’ in fact, while exhibiting costumes and masks, conceal the “magnificent fakery on the rest of the cast” (Berger 1961a: 80).²⁰ These rules, norms, or scripts are followed without knowing *why* they should be followed in the first place.

Berger concludes by noting that an emancipatory insight can be derived as a consequence of this sociological ‘debunking’, i.e., “we...contend that this attitude is not a one-sidedly oppressive one. It also has a liberating side” (ibid., 84). This awareness is liberating because *this* knowledge arises from *our* self-reflection: it depends on us as thinking beings. Realizing that “the oracles are ghostwritten by nervous little men who copy from each other” may be disconcerting, yet may be the most rewarding since we after all are the authors of “our own knowledge” (ibid., 84).

The Realization of Social World as Alibi: Stepping Outside of Society and into Individual Human

Existence

Berger’s social psychological description of society as fiction unearths a type of human authenticity that is compatible with that discovered by philosophical existentialism. Berger’s social psychological conception of bad faith is defined as follows: “Bad faith means that society

²⁰ He states: “As soon as we get beyond the strictly technological aspects of society, there are few of its aspects that cannot be sharply illuminated in this comic perspective of fictitiousness. Whether one looks at the world of learning, or the world of power, or the world of religion—everywhere one will find actors carefully masked and costumed to put over some magnificent fakery on the rest of the cast” (Berger 1961a: 80).

assists us in hiding our own actions from our awareness. The role becomes a moral alibi” (1961a: 89) and the actor “excuses himself by pointing to his social role and to the ideologies in which the role is enveloped” (ibid., 89).²¹ With bad faith an actor in the taken-for-granted play uses ‘society as an alibi’ and does not question whether social reality is fictional or detrimental to human existence. Bad faith is endemic to all cultures within which individuals posit blame on a societal role or society generally rather than free moral choice.

Berger’s description of capital punishment via the electric chair provides his most vivid accounts of the operation and moral consequences of bad faith. Societal roles are wielded so that no one will have to assume responsibility for the actual murder of a fellow human being. “No matter what method of deceit is finally used in the execution itself, it is a lie that nobody is doing any killing...This is the reality. The rest is fiction, mythology, alibi” (ibid., 88). He provides another example of a Russian spy captured by the German army who studies the German war manual to learn of the proper way to die *as a prisoner*, more so he could enact the role of ‘dying by the book.’ The officer who shoots him could then remark that he ‘died well’, ‘brave’, and so forth. On the other hand, one may observe the taken-for-granted bad faith whereby the officer gains respect for his victim and justifies his role as executioner. The victim also immediately attaches to a societal role; in this case the standard and ‘proper’ manner of death for a war prisoner. Both executioner and prisoner attach themselves to a societal alibi: “[B]ad faith is not an alibi from guilt but rather an alibi from terror. Both torturer and victim are in bad faith” (ibid., 91).

The most “terrifying aspects of existence” are also “avoided” through bad faith (Berger 1961a: 95). Following Heidegger, Berger deploys the notion of “das Man” to refer to a social

²¹ Berger modifies Sartre’s term “bad faith” to denote an actor submerged in a taken-for-granted societal role maintained as moral alibi.

generality “Man” or “mankind as such,” thus evacuating and extinguishing the particulars of each individual’s existence. The finality and terror of death is thus avoided: not an individual terror to be faced in a unique way, but as an abstraction applicable to “humanity as such.” For an example of generalized versus individualized finality of death, Berger points to a funeral he attended following World War II involving a tragic death of a Jewish child in which the rabbi stated ‘this is not the time for another Jew to die.’ This implies that we all die *as* something, in a role that “becomes a fiction which vicariously dies for them” (ibid., 97).

Only men die. Their anguish, their terror, and their courage cannot be captured in the social categories. Perhaps the deepest obscenity of society lies in the fact that it continues to try. Unlike their mammalian relatives, few men are permitted to die “off stage.” To the last moment the social comedy continues all around them, and, what is more, they are expected to participate in it (ibid., 97).

Humans hide from their particular existence, by pretended occupancy of a universal role or category. In radical contrast, Berger writes that an individual will experience authentication only when embracing the ecstasy (*ekstasis*) of “really confronting existence.” This is precisely that precarious liberating sociological consciousness that allows one to ‘step outside of oneself.’²² Generalities (e.g. ‘das Man,’ ‘societal role’) require that a person die *as* something. In this way, consciousness is structured to prevent genuine reflection on one’s agency. However, non-reflection is a fictitious, yet real, constraint.

Society provides from birth to death one’s roles, categories, placement, names, and identifications. Playing entirely within the freedom provided by these roles makes for a “flight

²² “However, it is not only this one terror which can be avoided in this way. The same is true of any experience of ecstasy, using that term in its original meaning of *ekstasis*—standing outside oneself. There are various situations in life in which it may suddenly seem to us that we have stepped outside the everyday course of events, that we are really confronting existence. This can be an experience of terror, though it need not always be. This writer has not fully understood why Heidegger gives such a privileged status to the one ecstasy of confronting my own death. There are other ecstasies of horror, awe, guilt, but also of sudden insight, pleasure, joy. What all ecstasies have in common is breaking through the routine, everyday, taken-for-granted course of our life. Society functions to prevent this break-through. It is especially its fictions which are designed for this purpose” (Berger 1961a: 96).

[into] bad faith...[and] to live in accordance with one's dramatic assignment" (Berger 1961a: 98).

What all these instances of total identification with a role have in common is the avoidance of ecstasy. These individuals never confront the universe as men, nakedly, openly. They always hide in the costumes of the social carnival. They cannot face the world except as officers, priests, political devotees, insurance salesmen, or faculty wives. That is, they cannot face the world at all (ibid., 99).

Berger, finally, applies this conceptualization of 'bad faith' to the church. The church and religion in general provide an individual 'leap' not into faith but into a religious ghetto (ibid., 181). The 'church' is very much a place where someone hides and masks within a total meaning system, the ultimate moral alibi within an "okay world" of explaining 'everything as alright.' This social world is a "village" erected to provide the "illusion of sanctity, safety, sanity, and order" (ibid., 125).

For in reality man does not live in an "okay world" at all. He rushes toward his own death on a course marked by indecipherable signs and surrounded on all sides by a darkness full of pain. He can become authentically human only if, in some way, he faces and comes to terms with this destiny (ibid., 121).

The all-encompassing meaning system in the "okay world" prevents the very leap out of bad faith that would permit "ecstasy or conversion which will transport him outside the system, even if only for a moment of intellectual inspection" (ibid., 125). The web of meanings in religion makes possible a moral community that is quite possibly essential to social solidarity (ibid., 103), yet this is also characterized by alibis, bad faith, and precariously elaborated scaffoldings fitted for an "okay world."²³

²³ He states: "One does not have to be an existentialist to perceive that existence lurks with terrors. Thrown into the world in one brief moment of consciousness, we are surrounded on all sides by mystery which includes our own destiny and the meaning of a universe not too obviously constructed for our comfort. From the first reassuring smile of the mother bending over a frightened infant, society provides us with structures in which we can live with a measure of ease and which announce to us every day that things are in order. Busying ourselves at the warm, well-lit

Existential Freedom and the Warranted Critique of Christianity Informing Christian Humanism:

Camus and Bonhöffer

Many times religion is an “operation of bad faith from beginning to end” (Berger 1961a: 125). “Religion is needed in society because men need bad faith. The paradigm of the social function of religion is the sword of the executioner at Freiburg” (ibid., 125). The anti-religious critique, for Berger, therefore contains a valid debunking consciousness.

Berger (1959a) applauds the French atheist-existential philosopher Camus for his penetrating, valid critiques of Christianity yet also surprisingly as a means of also *defending* Christian truth. Camus’s radical positing of a world stripped of metaphysical meaning and his several valid insights into the problem of Christian theodicy retain validity against those whose faith finds in God the ultimate moral alibi. Camus criticizes the Christian faith because it allows someone to easily rationalize suffering, specifically “innocent suffering” (418). “The Christian eschatology accepts injustice by pointing to eternity and to the suffering God on the cross...[which] make[s] men accessories to murder” (ibid., 418). Camus continuously draws on capital punishment themes where everyone affiliated with such an act are “accessories to murder” which Berger further extends by noting, “[t]here is an awful affinity between priest and hangman. That the symbol waved by Christian priests before countless victims of Christian torture is itself an instrument of execution may be grounds for reflection” (ibid., 418).²⁴

Second, Christianity as church sanctions disagreement with the status quo. It requires a “sacrifice to a political creed” (Berger 1959a: 418) where the Christian religious establishment

spots of the marketplace we can forget the howling visions of the night. Existence is leaning over a bottomless abyss. Society is the Potemkin village that shelters the abyss from our fearful eyes” (Berger 1961a: 97).

²⁴ It is noteworthy that *The Precarious Vision* (1961a) is similarly obsessed with the theme of capital punishment.

supports political rhetoric, approves war, and has messages preached behind pulpits for social issues, possibly even political sway in the voting booth.²⁵

Berger, apparently unconvinced of, or unwilling to fully embrace Camus's atheistic existentialism, uses his negation of Christian bad faith and instead directs it against the institution of religion. In short, Berger (1961a) indicts the precarious scaffolding that religion affords the individual in contemporary society just as he earlier indicts the notion of society as alibi. The Christian religion in the modern world, or any religion for that matter, comprises persons comforting themselves in an "okay world," wrapped in a moral alibi, and acting on the basis of a fictitious meaning system. Humans are still dealing with existence, death, and hope for life and the joys of life. This joy is ecstasy (*ekstasis*) and the first steps into freedom. For Berger, ecstasy as agency debunks society as a fiction, and a man as 'das Man.' The 'precarious vision' then in its fullest meaning is manifest as consciousness radically stripped of a metaphysically derived existence. Christianity devoid of its institutional comfort forces a confrontation with human moral autonomy.

Camus's final critique of Christianity centers on the concept of guilt. Jesus in the Gospels seems "melancholy" possibly due to the "guilt of God" (Berger: 1959a: 418). Moreover, "Jesus is guilty of the massacre of the innocents...the children of Bethlehem are dead, while he goes on living...the death of the Christian martyrs, and of all those martyred in turn by the new religion" (Ibid., 418). Considering that a "bystander" is guilty by allowing murder to occur, this implicates the idea of "God [as] the eternal bystander" (418). Camus's critique places on the table the fundamental question: *Can* a Christian be ethical and moral? Camus even questions whether or not a Christian could even exist as a decent human being.

²⁵ *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (1961b) provides a much more elaborate discussion.

It is Dietrich Bonhöffer who provides for Berger (1959b) a Christian response to Camus's anti-religious critique. Bonhöffer clarifies the terms of a new Christian ethic that can withstand these withering criticisms.²⁶ At present, the church does not project an image of joy but of gloom, doom, and sorrow. These are leveraged so that the church emerges as a place of therapy and a safe-zone (an "okay world") amidst the evil, modern world.

Camus and Bonhöffer each furnish Berger elements of a 'this-worldly' approach, yet Camus inconsistently (unlike Bonhöffer) adheres to the notion of the 'absurdity of human existence.'

The absurd was for Camus a starting point, not by any means the culmination of his thought. Moreover, even during this period he sounded a strong affirmation of life, the simple life of this world and this world only... This affirmation is a continuing theme. Camus passionately defends the ultimate validity of joys... Friendship and conversation, an open sensuality without guilt, swimming in the sea, the touch of the evening's cool breeze when the day's work is done—these are joys that all men can share, the joys of this life, the only real joys. Supernatural hopes are a betrayal of this common world of men and thus of humanity itself (1959a: 417).

For Berger, God addresses man as a human of His creation, not as the societal alibi man has created for himself. When God addresses man, he addresses him as a particular, finite human being. When man participates and masks moral agency by belief in the fictions, he becomes even more radically disconnected from God.²⁷ Christian humanism

...means to ground all moral imperatives in men and not in institutionalized fictions. It means to see through the deceptions of social structure, through the

²⁶ Bonhöffer's authenticity as a model contemporary Christian theologian significantly derives his involvement in a resistance movement against Hitler during WWII. He wrote several letters after his arrest by the Nazis and was executed in the Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945.

²⁷ He states: "Bonhöffer would have us stop thinking of secularization as primarily a turning away from God. He would have us think of it as revealing God's gift of freedom and of the world to man. Here we may use the Jewish concept known as *tsimtsum* or contraction: God created the world by contracting so that there was room for it. The act of creation was an act of renunciation on God's part. We can understand secularization as part of God's *tsimtsum*" (Berger 1959b: 451).

web of bad faith and rationalization. There is a very great liberation in acquiring such perception, though even this liberation pales compared with that which comes from God's eternal recognition of ourselves (Berger 1961a: 229).

Berger's Christian humanism, immensely important to Berger's conception of agency in the modern world, thus aligned with a 'this-worldly' existence as displayed in the following figure.

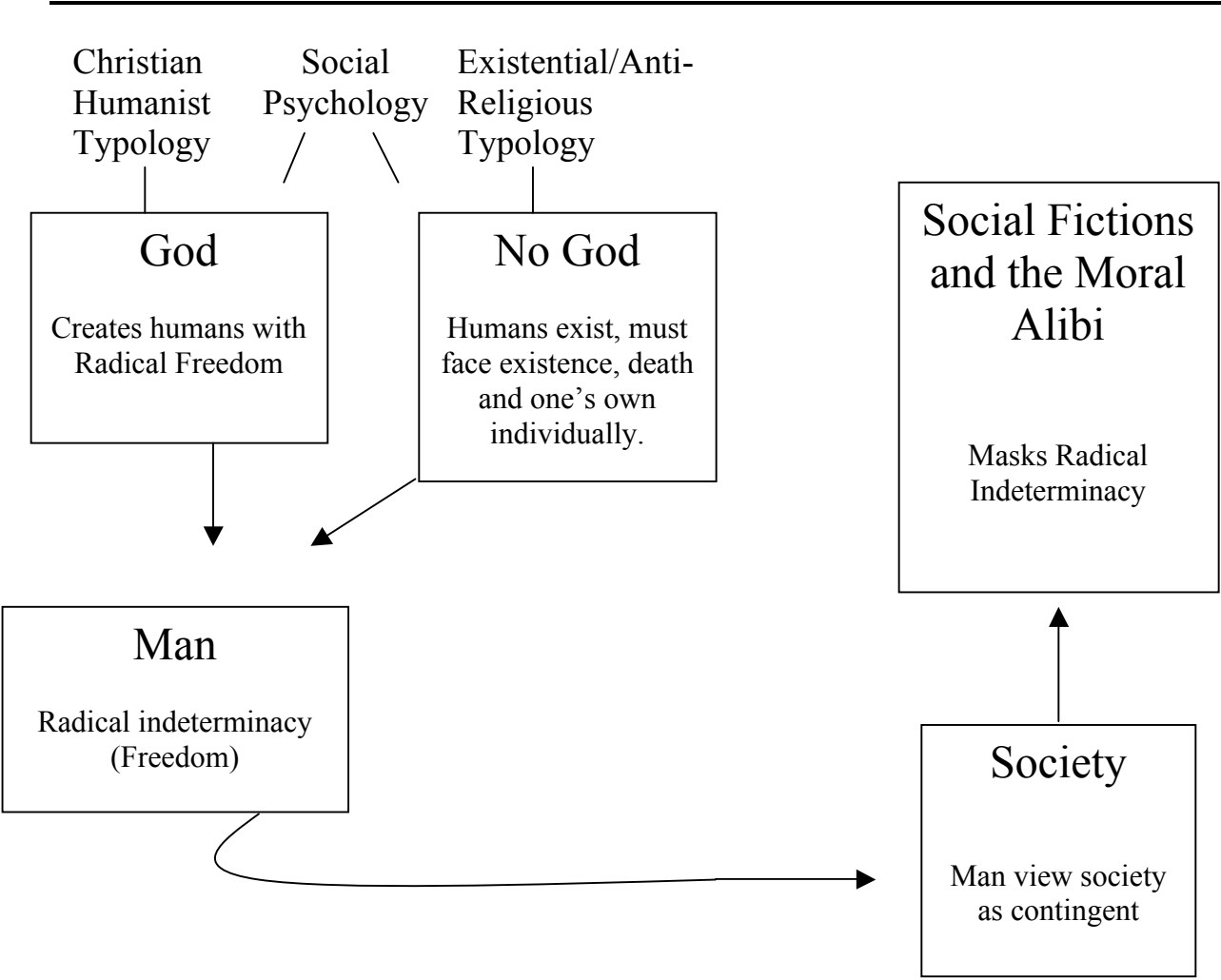


Figure 3 Christian Humanism aligned with the Existentialist Anti-Religious Critique

CHAPTER 4

THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT IN AMERICA: THE NEW ETHIC AND THE FUNCTIONAL RELIGIONS

This chapter explicates Berger's critique of the American religious establishment. Underpinning his analysis is a conception of the agency-structure relation deriving from his previous research. It involves such major themes as the routinization of charisma, motif research, existentialism, and Christian humanism.

The New Ethic and the Religious Establishment in America

Economic and Social Forces

Modern industrial growth in America is the principal causal context influencing the contemporary church and the individual believer, including especially its rapid societal, technological, and cultural consequences (Berger 1961b). American society in the early 1960s arose as a major force in world affairs, with Communism and developing 'Third-World' countries as emergent concerns. Other 'revolutionary' forces were also changing the American societal landscape. Medical advances, psychiatry, television, advertisements, and powerful marketing strategies, all were effectively re-shaping behavior on a mass scale. "[T]he impact of the new media of mass communications," Berger asserts, "[is] functioning as immensely powerful molders of consensus throughout the society" (ibid., 40).

The post-World War II era was characterized by problems of over-production, and a shift into a mass consumption-driven economy. Revolutionary economic forces were altering circumstances in fact, and in "consciousness" (Berger 1961b: 28). Technological advances, increasing goods, services, and standard of living; rising affluence, mobility, and freedom, all revolutionized the American scene. On the other hand, there are many unintended consequences

arising from “the ever more rapid transformation of our society, often in directions that we can but imperfectly foresee” (ibid., 24). This “economic revolution” can be a “vicious cycle, except that few [of its beneficiaries] would be disgruntled enough to call this relationship vicious” (ibid., 23).

The Secular/Religious Continuum and the New Ethic

Berger (1961b) focuses his analysis on the condition of American public and private life, noting in particular the “secular versus religious paradox.” This paradox drives, he asserts, the very behavioral “logic” of the individual. The religious sphere *seems* that it is radically separated from the secular. He defines secularization as follows:

...the term refers to a segregation of religious motives *within* the [confines of the] religious institution itself. Within the broad areas of political, economic, and social life, religious motives appear to be of little relevance. The logic of policy and decision-making in these areas is overwhelmingly secular in character” (ibid., 34; emphasis added).

What is most noteworthy is a “paradox that the religious establishment (and, for that matter, the religious renaissance of recent decades) is to be found in a highly secularized society” (ibid., 34). This paradox is explained by Berger as rooted in the fact that religious life is both “irrelevant” and “functional”: it serves economic forces, consumption, and integration of conformist beliefs and values and is therefore “passive rather than active.” Religious life is “acted upon rather than acting” (ibid., 93). Two different logics compete and motivate the individual’s behavior within and without the church.

The reality, of course, is that the person listening to the minister in church is a radically different one from the person who makes economic decisions the next day. When our typical church member leaves suburbia in the morning, he leaves behind him the person that played with the children, mowed the lawn, chatted with neighbors—and went to church. His actions now become dominated by a radically different logic—the logic of business, industry, politics, or whatever

other sector of public life the individual is related to. In this second life of his the church is totally absent (ibid., 37).

In other words, acts that occur in routinized everyday secular life have come to define religious life and have crystallized into a religious establishment. Paradoxically then, Berger (1961b) examines the religious establishment, institutions, communities, and finally individual believers. His conclusion: religious groups and individuals are solemnly complacent participants in societal structures. These assemblies are no different than other secular institutions. Because a revolutionizing industrial and technological dynamism has great impact on each, secular *and* religious institutions have in effect become overly conformist and now control individual choice.

Berger locates this collapse of genuine religiosity in the eclipse of the *Protestant spirit*. The Early American Protestants exhibited a ‘this-worldly’ ethic. Hard work and frugality were viewed as vehicles to propitiate the supernatural. Berger now observes a different ethos underwriting a shift from production to the consumerist “economy of abundance” (ibid., 28) that radically differs from the older ethic asserted in Max Weber’s famous analysis. “There can be little doubt” Berger asserts, “that American culture, despite all its Puritan vestiges, is veering away from such ‘asceticism.’ The ongoing of the advertising industry with the remnants of a thrift-oriented economic ethic gives us a vivid picture of this—and the conviction that advertisers are going to be successful!” (ibid, 28). Cultural symbols once saturated in a supernatural aura have dissipated. God appears now only in times of extreme despair, danger or extreme crisis, thus calling into question a standard sociological definition of religion, as a persistent ‘preoccupation with the supernatural’ (ibid., 42).²⁸

²⁸ He states: “In the former case, [i.e. the classical Protestant ethic] the ethical emphasis was indeed this-worldly...but this ethic was meaningful only against a background of intense preoccupation with supernatural realities. Today, the supernatural has receded into a remote hinterland of consciousness, mainly to break forth in moments of personal crisis, while the this-worldly ethic has remained with a vengeance. Indeed, if religion were to

In this new ethic, emphasis is placed on conscience, and emotional appeasement rather than supernatural appeasement. Emphasis on harmony and equilibrium are now expressed in community gatherings where American values compare analogously with Confucianism, a ‘way of the middle’ (Berger 1961b: 48-49).²⁹ The harmonious ethic of equilibrium now suppresses metaphysical concerns with the sacred. A ‘common faith’ has generalized religion as morally and psychologically appeasing value-sets.³⁰ Religion devolves into cultural concerns and is segregated as leisure activity. American culture shields and masks all signs of discord and suffering as children socialized in suburbia are comparable to a child who has been picked to be the new Buddha, to be protected from disclosure suffering, pain, or any forms of worldly discomforts (ibid., 48). This new ethic disseminates individuals into a structure lacking agency.

American cultural values are integrated by the church and function to shelter adherents from the terrors of the world. Evil, suffering, pain, and encounters with the supernatural, are viewed as forms of pathology that must be quickly cured in order to bring an individual back into harmony. God is relegated to the farthest reaches of the universe, and the deepest pathological concerns of the mind. The new ethic also reflects consumerist affluence generalized in a common faith and community value system. Moral conduct no longer struggles with core

be identified with some sort of preoccupation with the supernatural, then what is said and done in most of our churches can hardly be given that name at all” (Berger 1961b: 42).

²⁹ He states: “For, if human existence could be said to have a day side and a night side, then American values strongly emphasize the former against the latter. In this respect, American culture has a rather striking resemblance to that of Confucianist China, where the metaphysical concerns were also suppressed in the sane, sensible conduct of one’s practical life...Such a cultural “way of the middle” (to use a Confucianist term) will attempt to avoid any experiences of ecstasy, that is, any experiences where men may step outside the routine of everyday life and confront the terrors of their condition...Death cannot be faced and therefore must be denied. But the denial of metaphysical concerns is not limited to the extreme fact of death. Our culture shields us effectively from all visible signs of suffering and degradation” (Berger 1961b: 48).

³⁰ Will Herberg coins the term “common faith” and Martin Marty similarly wields a notion of “religion-in-general” (Berger 1961a: 41).

metaphysical questions. In sum, the American religious establishment is viewed by Berger as an institutional expression of an over-arching post-WWII conformist American value system. This system prevents an individual from stepping outside of everyday-life routines; hard work and frugality have been replaced by competition, success, and secular activism. Business, churches, political, and educational institutions all contain these same conformist values. (Berger 1961b: 43).

The Functional Religions

The functionality of the secular realm (e.g. economic, cultural, political, and social) perpetuates complacency in the religious realm. The most important function of religion therefore is to reproduce symbolic integration thereby facilitating social integration.³¹ Religion sustains and reproduces structural-institutional existence. It provides a conformity that explains “the cohesion of the American value system” and why that cohesion has “increased rather than decreased” in religious communities (Berger 1961b: 40).

Second, there is an “intimate relationship between religion and the state” (Berger 1961b: 58) in America despite protestations to the contrary. The nation was founded as a religiously inspired republic. Many, if not all political candidates must insert religious language—often-times to affirm their Christian *bona fides*. To appear as an atheist or agnostic (much less another faith altogether), or to use excessively secularist rhetoric would very much disrupt the “political marriage” (ibid., 60). This ‘common faith’ and political religion presumes adherence to those Judeo-Christian values that politicians never fail to mention. Political parties ceremonially begin

³¹ Berger is indebted to Parsonian functionalism in this regard. See e.g. Talcott Parsons [1937]1949. *The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers*. Illinois: The Free Press. Talcott Parsons 1951. *The Social System*. Illinois: The Free Press. Especially see e.g. Talcott Parsons 1960. *Structure and Process in Modern Societies*. Illinois: The Free Press.

their conventions with prayers, moments of silence, and speeches rhetorically sprinkled with religious symbols. These moral fictions become social placeholders.

A vast array of state-issued political incentives to religious groups is provided, such as tax-exempt status. Successful religious entrepreneurs amass significant capital in property and other investments. Non-profit organizations actively promote welfare and well-being in their surrounding communities, society, and the world at large and resemble purely secular groups that also focus on the needy. Military chaplains must honor and uphold secular rules, thereby securing pay and benefits from the government. Clergy may even receive state training if in the worst war-time scenarios they are called upon to provide emergency and spiritual assistance to the laity. Postage stamps, money and other state-issued materials quite often contain religious imagery. Educational institutions often socialize children using a healthy dose of ‘civil religion.’ Effectively, then, this political religion continuum may be interpreted as a form of social control (Berger 1961b).

What Berger calls ‘social religion’ reinforces “status symbolism” thereby reaffirming political and cultural religions (Berger 1961b: 73). Churches are often segregated by both class and ethnicity thus mirroring social class structures. Class and race are divided in the churches characterizing this “cultural tone” and “faithfully mirror...class prejudices” (ibid., 89). Often racial prejudices creep into these meaning systems due to the preferences of the church laity themselves, for example, whether or not desegregation is warranted. In local church communities there exists homogeneity and class exclusion, and at the macro-level are definite divisions between middle-working and lower-classes thus mirroring social “class dynamics” (ibid., 82-83). Lower classes aspire to participate in a middle-class value system, and the middle-class, to perpetuate mainstream cultural and political values. Those who most often have “a stake in

society and the community” are also in a position to maintain the church status quo comprised of ‘pillars within the community’ that already occupy high-level positions in secular life, and oftentimes they become clergy (ibid., 84-87). Sanctioning comes about when non-conforming deviants conflict with middle-class values of respectability and class homogeneity; other values include honorability, responsibility, respectability, success, and activism.

At the center of this cultural perpetuation is the middle-class who furnish values upholding the status quo, including political beliefs, rhetoric, and other activities of socio-political relevance. And of course the pulpit itself is not immune to such means of integration and social control. Ministers as members of a class-based value system avoid conflict. If the clergy observe no conflict and the laity appears happy and pleased it assumes the message must be correct. Theology and liturgical practices are constricted by social group conformity.

Everyday individual religious life is easily comparable to business, office, and day-to-day life routines. Church life is office life with “a peculiar affinity with the business community” where lay leaders are “also successful in the economic world” (Berger 1961b: 85). Theological rhetoric must remain “popular with the laity,” and uphold the “common views” (ibid., 85); and, unpopular politics, morals, or messages that disrupt the integrated value system of the church are usually proscribed. Social religion functions as conformity, success values, political control, and a middling ethic of harmony and solemnity and prevents breaches.

Finally, a type of ‘psychological religion’ is characterized by sheer promotion of ‘well-being.’ Religious institutions are then viewed as a means to achieve individual psychological security and promote an overall symbolic integration (Berger 1961b: 93). Religious psychological models provide individuals with coping mechanisms for “minor and major crises” and are “conducive to mental health” (ibid., 96). An ‘O.K. world’ religion dispels these

“psychological anxieties” (ibid., 97) in a manner similar to the Freudian “psychotherapy movement” (ibid., 97). Clergy even are trained in psychology and counseling in order to provide therapeutic solutions confronting the laity. Because “the answer” is within the churches, individual believers are relieved of agentic powers; they have now become functionally integrated with those forces becoming ossified, general, and common. Christianity has become isomorphic with these societal forces and no longer a radical spiritual reflection rooted in moral autonomy. Religion as a structure in American society functions to avoid terrors and occasional mishaps and furthers a routine in which the individual adjusts to normative expectations, rules, and roles.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND SPECULATIVE REMARKS

Peter L. Berger focuses his conception of agency upon the ‘inner’ transcendent meaning given to the religious object as such (*spirit*) by social actors. More importantly, it may be inferred that Berger conceives agency as the ability to move through time and history outside of routine, i.e. as unmediated spiritual encounter. Over time, his motif typologies predict the routinization process: the when and how of the group dynamics leading to formal patterning. His discussion of the World War II-era over-formalization and restriction of individual freedom echoes Max Weber’s broader rationalization thesis. For Berger, the “sect” represents an attempted exit from the mainstream social world, yet still its patterning eventually inhibits individual or group agency and its “fundamental motif” is tamed by structure and history. Time simultaneously restricts and reenergizes charisma and Berger’s extensive use of motif typologies permit discovery of potential charismatic points of departure for individual or group agents.

The Problematic Account of ‘Social Structure’ in Berger

Berger stresses that ecstasy makes agency possible. But if one must step outside of society and routine, how does one actually exit structure? Is it possible that Berger is more structuralist than he himself admits? Though known as *the* sociologist of consciousness and subjectivity, his scaffolding actually presumes a structure of some sort. Indeed it needs a ‘real’ society that then may be exposed as fictitious. His sociology in short may be structure-centered after all and more reliant on implicit patterns than he admits.

Any empirical-sociological quest to discover unmediated and/or authentic ‘inner-meaning’ presents problems however. Individuals either adhere to or distance themselves from

webs of meaning. Situations in the modern, pluralistic ideological-spiritual market place facilitate conversion or alternation. Berger's explanations for the phenomena of conversion and alternation can only occur by presuming a determinate structure of relations, i.e. meaning systems.

The Noise of Solemn Assemblies (1961b) is the culmination of Berger's earliest conception of agency-structure relations. One detects all of the following: his reliance on Weber, routinization, charisma, motif research, and his conception of agency as an ecstatic stepping outside of routine. Yet his analysis confirms that at all times a structure of some sort constrains thus limiting the empirical agent. Macro-scale American society constrains this even further. For example, the integrative functions in culture, politics, and the social and psychological dimensions tend strongly towards equilibrium, and a 'middle-way' ethic reflect these larger structures. He describes structure as dampening opportunities for community that a truly ecstatic religious individual could experience as empowering individual interests or eccentricities. He does not however actually provide an account of an empirical social structure compatible with his spiritual assumption.

For Berger, *authenticity* demands that individual existence triumph over generalizations, bad faith, and those fictional alibis upholding society. Berger's quest to discover those empirical moments in society where individuals can step outside of the routine in all likelihood succumbs to his idealistic first principle, i.e. true existence can only be attained outside the existence of society as such.

Is a Theological Sociology Possible?

The question remains whether or not Berger's theology and sociology are compatible. Berger advocates various strategies by which modern Christians can break free of structural

constraints, e.g. setting up open communities within these structures, or embracing a rebellious, modern, ‘this-worldly’ ethic. But can Berger *logically* maintain a sociological theology or theological sociology? His intentions are apparent:

It is against this backdrop that we must understand the religious phenomenon in America. And, having attempted to understand it, it is against this same background that we must ask what the mission of the Christian Church ought to be in society (1961b: 30).

Perhaps Berger is attempting to reconcile his personal theological convictions with his apparent high regard for the Enlightenment project. This project envisions a society that will ‘free the man’ and remains the dream of liberal sociology. Berger reminds us of the “demand[] that sociologists lift their heads occasionally from their computer print-outs to address the larger issues that gave birth to the discipline” (Redfoot 1986: 118). Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber, like Berger, appropriate strands of German thought and champion the freeing aspects of the Protestant conception of human moral freedom. Hegel calls this the Kantian religion and Weber traces its pedigree to Luther’s concept of the priesthood of the individual believer. The human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) promote that spiritual energy inherent in every individual agent: a spirit that moves, propels, and tantalizes behavior to travel various indeterminate paths in life. The modern cosmopolitan setting comprises potentially a new context for these conditions to arise. It is noteworthy then that Berger to this day promotes the same plural, spiritual marketplace that he first describes in his dissertation. Berger is unafraid to defend his personal spiritual beliefs, and by so doing the reader remains in dialogue with a unique consciousness seeking to discover its own path to freedom and truth. It is laudable that he displays a very meticulous attachment to objectivity and frequently directs the reader to

recognize those moments when he owns his beliefs, speculations, or mere conjectures, and those when he decides to actually ‘put on his sociological cap’ so to speak.

Berger’s radical epistemology means that no form of knowledge or data is off the table. This manner of addressing empirical phenomena (in his own Bergerian way) possibly remains true to the sociological discipline. His analysis of theological constructions, church behavior, and religion as an ‘insider’ is also consistent with an objective viewpoint. He views a true Christianity as one aligned with the liberal disciplines of the Enlightenment, and also with many aspects of existentialism. This is unproblematic as far as it goes, yet, to delve further is indeed to enter a realm of faith that betrays both logical and empirical proof.

Concluding Speculative Remarks: Berger’s Battle with Eros

Berger’s (1960) empirical-sociological quest is for a meaningful community within “the organizational complexity” of “church life”: one not reaching toward the heavens, or steeped in metaphysical or social alibis (22). As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Swedish Lund School and Anders Nygren’s ([1932]1953) value-free observations provide Berger’s point of departure. Nygren asserts that Western religious history contains three fundamental motifs: *Eros*, *Nomos*, and *Agape*. These ideal motif typologies undergird all historical actions, behaviors, and beliefs. *Eros* is associated with a Hellenistic tradition that places God’s love external to and/or metaphysically beyond a worldly reality. Individual and group characteristics focus on self-love. *Agape* is that ‘true’ form of Christian love given directly by God and is only accessible under conditions of faithful freedom. *Nomos* is that security of feeling under law commonly associated with Judaism. According to Nygren’s theology the relative prevalence of these motifs provides clues as to how God’s presence is understood within communities and civilizations. *Agape*, for Berger, is given by God in that moment when an individual is truly freed to accept it. He claims

in the modern age the search for *Agape* is then the sociological search for communal church conditions that enable this individual freedom to be expressed (Berger 1960).

Changes in the relative force exerted by a motif correlates with changes in religious groups, churches, and civilizations. *Agape* and *Eros* compete as opposing motifs. Berger uses Ferdinand Tönnies' typology of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to further analyze the consequences over time of this motif conflict between *Agape* and *Eros*. A quest for *Gemeinschaft* or traditional communal life arises in the midst of *Gesellschaft*, i.e. urban individuated life. The latter is often impersonal and bureaucratic, and facilitates behaviors associated with city life. Another way of defining the *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* distinction is to contrast a rural family unit with that of business or office life.

As a result of the rapid technological growth stemming from the industrial revolution “our civilization has been subject to an ever-more rapid and thorough” (Berger 1960: 14) increase in associations, human relations, or sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*). The sociological empirical trend is explained as “an age that forces people to live most of their lives in large, impersonal, bureaucratic structures” where there is a new retreat into suburbia in response to these forces. The common conception of the Christian church then becomes one of a community escaping the evils of the modern urban world. A retreat to suburban life is accompanied however with the ‘guilt’ of not having “neighborly relations” in urban settings (Berger 1960: 16). At the same time, Christian urban communities manifest guilt and an uneasiness toward their modern neighbors that for Berger “completely distorts the real question as to what Christian community ought to be in [a truly] modern society” (ibid., 16). Regardless of what the conditions of Christian community *should* be and what types of freedom are possible in modern society, Berger definitely indicates where he believes a worthwhile agency is *not* to be found.

Whatever answer we may come up with, Christian community is certainly *not* the establishment of agrarian enclaves within urban culture. There is no reason, other than that of personal taste, why Christians cannot welcome the possibilities of highly individuated community that modern society has to offer (ibid, 16).

Hence, Berger's conundrum: bureaucratic organization will not allow freedom, and neither can a pretended rural enclave; Berger must therefore identify a structure that permits the agency he believes can be found within the 'community' form of church (though within a modern, metropolitan setting).

Berger's definition of community considerably differs from typical sociological conceptions and possibly betrays his fundamental theological standpoint. Communities are for him the "social forms in which *agape* can express itself...the ruralistic image of community, insofar as it understands itself as Christian can be theologially criticized as confusing *eros* and *agape*" (1960: 17). Rather than a product of mere theological speculation, though, Berger claims that he can *sociologically* describe human relations and examine whether or not these group movements can formulate the conditions necessary for the temporal manifestation of *Agape*. He does this with what he calls Max Weber's "law" of the 'routinization of charisma' (ibid., 17).

Berger claims that sociological, empirical, and historical evidence confirms the fact that whereas the church underpins *Eros*, the sect facilitates *Agape*. "The ideal-typical situation in terms of the sociology of religion is the transition from sect to church...The close community of believers, sociologically visible in the nascent stage of the movement, now becomes dissipated in the large structures of ecclesiastical organizations" (ibid., 17). Historical verification of this routinization effect appears "again and again in church history" and "can be partially interpreted as the effort to re-discover social forms in which *agape* could be empirically expressed" (ibid., 17). Berger, following Anders Nygren's definition of community, views *agape* as one type of

community where “each member bases his actions solely on what he considers the *others*’ needs to be...[and] a community totally open to all who wish to enter...[and choosing] all our friends exclusively by the criterion of who needs us most” (ibid., 17-18). This community would “spell the end of society and sociability as we know it” (ibid., 18) possibly due to its empirical impossibility and definitely resulting of Berger’s awareness of an integrated social order. The contemporary family and American rural retreat is the opposite of this type of community, however, and therefore *agape* is “empirically unavailable” due to these rural forms of behavior he claims are present in middle-class Protestants. Overarching societal functions further reinforce the Protestant trend to maintain rural and therefore closed communities disconnected from modern society. Figure 4 displays Berger’s conception of agency.

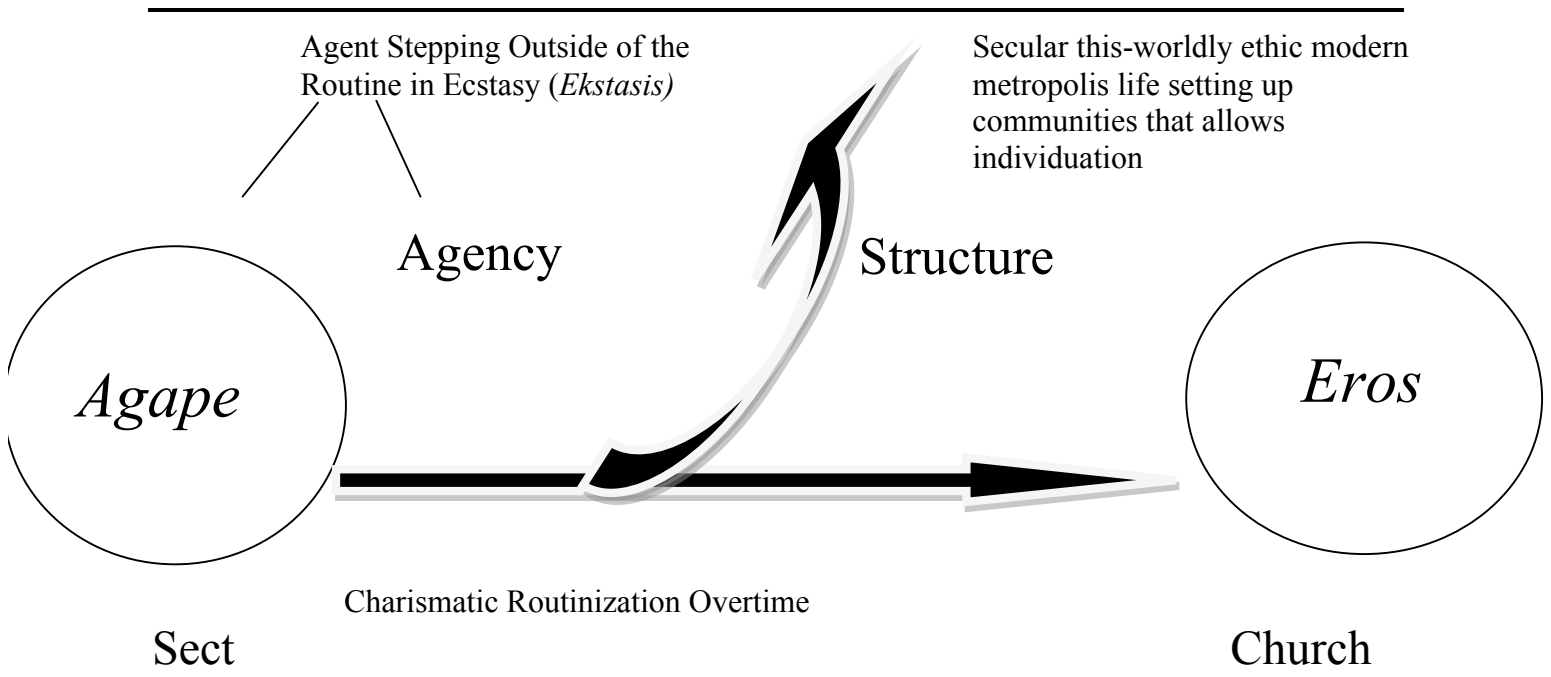


Figure 4 Peter Berger’s Conception of Agency

Nygren's terms may appear "strange indeed to a sociologist's eye," but church history and the concept of routinization create those pressures that inspire sectarian movements to arise in the church in quest of *agape* (ibid, 20). It is evident that when Berger's own value-free assessments end, and his ethical and moral values begin, he is looking for the community, similar to Barth and Bonhöffer's, that is secularized, has come of age in the modern world and one that simultaneously allows individuation and *Agape*. Given structures that tend toward *Eros*, Berger searches for alternative structures of community permitting ecstasy. A social agent in this regard can only be conceived in Berger's theory as a spiritual one. It is noteworthy that Berger sees in theological motifs another empirical artifact in his sociological quest for truth, yet also an element of faith where one must simply concede 'these are hinterlands where one cannot go.'

Berger's failure to identify the conditions for concrete empirical agency are rooted most directly, though, in these 'hinterlands.' *Agape* presumes an unmediated spiritual encounter free by definition of any actual historically created product made by and for actual humans as social beings. Genuine agency must therefore be located *outside* the historical capacities of actual agents. *Agape* is not something actually even accomplished in its basic formulation. *Agape* is rooted in a transcendent God-full and God-given moment. It is not a love attainable socially at all, but only by those whose faith has permitted an actual exit from the societal routine so as to directly encounter God's grace as gift.

The fatal irony in Berger's position is this: genuine agency *in* history is only finally attainable by *exiting* history. It is faith in the idea that true human freedom is a gift not of human action, but of its surrender. Berger's deepest theological convictions have led him to posit a notion of agency that is both non-empirical, and non-attainable. An article of faith—or rather deduction from faith—"society" is Berger's story about a fictional story—about "society" and

“social order”—whose real truth is merely bad faith and its consequences. In the end, Berger’s story is of a theologian whose sociology stopped short of the very history—empirical, material, social—it had sought to explain.

It is also in that spirit that Berger’s appropriation of the sociological tradition was conducted. Berger sought alliances with the radical contingency of sociological fact he identified in various schools of social psychology. The notion of the fictional society and its precariousness *required* a sociology of this sort. In its most radical expressions it provides for Berger what is in effect a merely contingent array of actors whose convictions, should they change, would radically rupture the very fabric of the social order. This is truly the existentialistic society, or what he would soon coin as a ‘humanistic sociology’ (Berger: 1963b).

But this existentializing of social order even applied to traditions positing a notion of society strictly rooted in definite functional and institutional requisites. On close inspection though even the solidity of structural functionalism evaporates in Berger’s account to become nothing but the will to power of a *non-truly Christian* church and its post-war accommodation with the forces of technological and cultural modernity.

In the end it is truly irrelevant whether a radically contingent or apparently structuralist sociology is engaged. Berger’s appropriation of their insights is merely to display the various flavors society and its theorists and describers have conjured as a means of avoiding the world that truly exists; its ultimate Creator; and one’s own indescribable mysterious relation to the Divine *outside history*.

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