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Watering a Dying Canopy: How Peter Berger Can Help Us Understand Communication in a Modern Age

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Watering a Dying Canopy:

How Peter Berger Can Help Us Understand Communication in a Modern Age

Julia Richardson

Abstract

In many instances of conflict and confusion, effective communication can be a useful tool in solving problems. When individuals experience a breakdown in communication, it can be frustrating as well as harmful for everyone involved. This autoethnography seeks to explain and remedy issues of communication breakdown through the lens of religious theory, primarily with regard to Peter Berger's ideas of world construction and maintenance. When once taken-for-granted "worlds" that provide stability become threatened, one way communities respond is by isolating themselves from ideas which pose a threat to their way of life. In a new age of pluralism, this isolation has resulted in difficulties in communication when opposing beliefs are brought into play. This phenomenon is not harmless. Once cemented within individuals, lack of openness to outsider views can result in the continuation of bigoted beliefs and behaviors that present real-world harm. However, greater understanding of the phenomenon can result in both emotional healing and different strategies to combat bigotry.

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Introduction

In America, the dinner table is a diverse landscape, ranging from elegant silverware to festive table arrangements to simple disposable settings. It is at these tables that the mythological nuclear family sits together and enjoys one another's company. They may discuss the happenings of their day, recent outcomes of sporting events, or their opinions on the latest celebrity gossip. Within this vast array of options, one factor uniting these tables and their residents is the typically banned topics of conversation: politics and religion. I have never been very good at adhering to that ban.

Throughout my life, my most poignant memories of time spent with my mother's parents have been controversial dinner table conversations. My grandparents were always extremely religious. They were Christians, they were Southern Baptists, and they tended to be intolerant of beliefs outside of their own. Growing up, I never understood why I could not have a productive conversation with them about religion, whether the topic be Christian theology, religion's impact on culture, or even the legitimacy of other religious beliefs in general. Attempting to justify my own opinions on religious issues was akin to talking to a brick wall. Those I spoke to about my experiences with my grandparents constantly told me, "they're just from a different generation and they're set in their ways." This sentiment never fully comforted me, but it did make me curious.

Problems of intergenerational communication occur frequently and are difficult to work through, with technological advances made in recent decades only worsening the gaps that disrupt generational communication. Anyone who has had to teach someone older than they are how to use a cell phone will understand how frustrating it can be to explain something new to someone who is "set in their ways." It can sometimes be arduous for separate generations to

explain their perspectives to one another (to the extent that these perspectives are generalizable), and it can seem downright impossible for them to truly understand one another. Not all intergenerational communication is this difficult, and many members of intergenerational relationships are open to and accepting of new ideas. Why is it, then, that some members of older generations are so resistant to the ideas of their younger peers? In my case, specifically, why is there such polarizing refusal to listen from my older, Southern Baptist grandparents? I will argue that we can understand this best by examining the framework of understanding provided by Peter Berger's theories about sacred canopies, world maintenance, and plausibility structures. The baby boomer generation and those prior to it are more resistant to the experiential arguments of younger generations because these arguments present a threat to older generations' previously taken-for-granted way of life.

Section 1: The World According to Berger

In 1967, Peter Berger published *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, which introduced a new approach to viewing society, particularly, the creation and maintenance of “worlds.” In Berger’s theory, human “worlds” are simply a different term for culture, or the different societies that we simultaneously shape and allow to shape us.¹ He argues that these worlds are socially constructed and maintained through the processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. The first phase of world construction is externalization, which, as the term world construction suggests, occurs when we construct the world around us. We externalize the world through our created products, material and otherwise. We produce language just as much as we produce tools that allow us to interact with and change our physical environment, and both of these productions help form our societies.² The second phase, objectivation, occurs when these products, especially the non-material ones, become objectively real to the inhabitants of a world. During this stage, the very things that we create exert control over us, and we lose the ability to truly change them.³ The objective reality of these productions makes way for the third stage, internalization. It is at this point in the process of world construction that we internalize our created society, where we forget our part in the construction of it and see ourselves as active participants in a reality that we cannot change.⁴

Socially constructed worlds do not have to be religious in nature. However, because this paper will focus on understanding experiences with religion through the lens of Berger’s theory, examples pertaining to religion are especially relevant. Religions are created by humans and eventually made real, up until the point that people see themselves as active participants in the

¹ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 6.

² Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 4-6.

³ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 9.

⁴ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 4.

world created by their religious belief. For example, one might apply the lens of Berger's theory to the Christian tradition. Tracking the development of Christianity through Bergerian world construction, people created the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and these scriptures and beliefs then became objectively real as a multitude of people started subscribing to and propagating them. Now, most Christians see themselves as creations in a world that God has crafted in a specific way, fully participating in and internalizing the world as it is understood through a Christian lens.

The processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization are constantly in motion. Children and immigrants to different worlds must be made to learn and internalize the "objectivated meanings" which shape that world. In reteaching and reinterpreting long-held beliefs, we recreate them for ourselves at the same time that we present them to new generations. We make these objectivated meanings real again and we re-internalize them, making them more our own in our pronouncement of faith in them.⁵ However, these constant processes are as "inherently precarious" as they are re-objectivating.⁶ Therefore, it is necessary for these worlds to have elements which help maintain these worlds and their processes, guarding them against their own precarious nature.

One such element that supports and maintains worlds are legitimations, or "socially objectivated 'knowledge' that serves to explain and justify the social order."⁷ A legitimation does not have to be rational in order to be effective. In fact, many pre-theoretical legitimations are highly irrational, often following a structure that begs the question, one that boldly states: this is what we do because this is the way things are done. These pre-theoretical legitimations are commonly used in plausibility structures where values are taken for granted and often

⁵ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 15.

⁶ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 29.

⁷ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 29.

unquestioned. In contrast, theoretical legitimations are those that are “explained and justified by means of specialized bodies of ‘knowledge.’”⁸ These theoretical legitimations are often based on sources such as scripture or church maxims. There are also explicitly theoretical legitimations, which are quite rare in plausibility structures where values are largely taken for granted. These legitimations are much more developed and expansive than their counterparts, aiming to center every observation about the world around some sort of grand narrative or truth. Explicitly theoretical legitimations seek to explain away aspects of the world that may seem contradictory to taken-for-granted values. With enough layers of thought and explanation, anything can be slotted into its proper place within a plausibility structure. Once again, legitimations are effective as long as they function well enough to propagate and maintain a world for the insiders of a social reality. They may appear completely bizarre and unconvincing to outsiders, but a legitimation’s purpose is not to bring new members into a world. As long as a legitimation helps to stabilize a world’s constructive processes, it is effective.

Berger argues that, more than just being socially constructed, religion is also an extremely powerful legitimating force. Scripture and widely held beliefs provide answers to questions that religious adherents may have about how to act and why to act in that certain way. For Christians, specifically, being able to point to a certain verse of the Bible as an explanation for behavior may validate the world in a manner that seems untouchable. God’s knowledge, power, and love will always be greater than humanity’s. Therefore, Christians do not have to be concerned with the moral, social, and political expectations of the general public, because humanity’s voice will never be as important or even as correct as the higher authority they submit to. This legitimating force is as powerful as it is difficult to argue with, as the beliefs that

⁸ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 30-32.

Christians consider to be sacred will always hold a greater weight than the arguments of real humans.

Another essential force of world maintenance is plausibility structures. Berger defines a plausibility structure as “a social ‘base’ for its continuing existence as a world that is real to actual human beings.”⁹ Anything that makes a social reality appear to be obvious and taken for granted is a plausibility structure, including social settings outside of an institution that propagate the same beliefs as that institution. The more insular a plausibility structure is, the stronger a social reality is. One example of a strong religious social reality would be a small rural town built around a Southern Baptist church.¹⁰ If the majority of town residents attend this church and hold the ideals it generates to be true, then a singular resident of the town will be constantly surrounded by people who reaffirm their commitment to that belief. The “social base” of the plausibility structures that exist within the social reality make the belief in that reality strong. It is embedded into the individual every time they go grocery shopping, attend school, or talk with relatives and friends. As Nancy Ammerman succinctly puts it in an essay on the continuing importance of Berger’s plausibility structures: “The religious person is sustained in a religious view of the world by being surrounded in all her most significant relationships by others whose actions and assumptions reinforce the taken-for-granted nature of that world.”¹¹

These structures serve as the base for all worlds that maintain human existence in society as we know it. Their purpose is not only to preserve the socially legitimated world, but also to protect it against the “anomic forces endemic to the human condition” – or chaos – that

⁹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 45.

¹⁰ Here, “built around” refers to the original plausibility structures that could be found in American society, where a town was literally constructed around a particular faith/church. Nowadays, one could view towns as “surrounding” a church.

¹¹ Nancy T. Ammerman, “From Canopies to Conversations: The Continuing Significance of ‘Plausibility Structures,’” in *Peter L. Berger and the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Titus Hjelm (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018) 29.

surrounds those who take part in society.¹² Religion has the ability to alleviate the mental and emotional anguish of its adherents, to give meaning to life, to provide a moral and ethical foundation to live by. When a close relative dies, a Christian will find peace in the idea that their eternal soul is at rest, and that they have the possibility of experiencing the afterlife with that person. As Berger puts it so eloquently, when faced with the pain that everyday life causes and the terror of uncertainty, plausibility structures provide a “sheltering canopy,” the titular *sacred canopy*, that extends to cover even those experiences that may “reduce the individual to howling animality.”¹³

Strong plausibility structures and taken-for-granted social realities were once prominent across the American religious landscape, and remain essential for maintaining strong Christian faith. As Berger states:

The reality of the Christian world depends upon the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized in such a way that this world will be real *to them*. When this plausibility structure loses its intactness or continuity, the Christian world begins to totter and its reality ceases to impose itself as self-evident truth.¹⁴

In his book, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, Robert Wuthnow describes the religious landscape of America in the early 20th century as one largely composed of inextricably intertwined churches and communities. Wuthnow describes neighborhoods built around the fact that “the people who attended the church lived nearby, forming a community of friends and relatives.”¹⁵ Indeed, as one of Wuthnow’s interviewees stated, “the church was the center of our lives. Our life revolved around the church.”¹⁶ The image of individuals’ lives

¹² Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 53.

¹³ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 55.

¹⁴ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 46.

¹⁵ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 25.

¹⁶ Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 25

revolving around a church is precisely the kind of strong social base that Berger describes, where almost all members of a community legitimate each other's values, values which will likely be held and propagated by the church they find themselves living near. Living in a world where social events are church events, where community is a congregation, it is extremely easy for residents to begin taking their experience of the world for granted. Here, the sacred canopy is a thriving organism that forms an almost symbiotic relationship with its community, being watered by its residents and in turn protecting them from the chaos of the great unknown.

Southern Baptist Structures

Since my own grandparents are Southern Baptists, it may be useful here to concentrate on analyzing the social bases of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and its multitude of churches through the lens of Bergarian theory in order to understand their upbringing better. In line with Wuthnow's analysis of old-form spirituality, Southern Baptist churches have historically created strong social bases, with the small towns that typically surrounded these churches helping to constantly re-make and maintain the world as Southern Baptism understands it.

Analysis of the sociological context of the SBC from its founding in the 1800s places these churches as not only a "central unit of worship," in the sense that the church is the center of Southern Baptist faith gatherings, but also "a mechanism for strengthening...common life."¹⁷ The church often served as a common gathering space, or a social base, for the towns established around it. In a pre-Industrial society, Americans were largely unable to easily communicate with those outside of their community. Due to the lack of access to instant communication found in

¹⁷ Larry L. McSwain, "The Sociological Context for Southern Baptist Associations," *Review and Expositor* 77, no. 2 (1980): 201.

the later-developed long-distance telegraph and telephone, the social bases of these towns and churches would be rather insulated, allowing members of the base to cultivate their own community guidelines without strong outside interference. Therefore, they would serve as strong Southern Baptist plausibility structures, maintaining the world through constant and largely unquestioned propagation of church values.

Overall, the sociological framework of the SBC paints a picture of social realities that have relied upon the church as a central communal space, a space where beliefs and values are shared amongst its members. Strong plausibility structures that helped maintain and propagate Southern Baptist ideals created taken-for-granted social realities that generations of members enjoyed. In short, Southern Baptists have historically been reliant upon strong plausibility structures and taken-for-granted social bases which re-legitimate and thereby maintain the Southern Baptist world.

This phenomenon continued to be the case for years to come, as individuals within these communities “inscribed religious practices within the boundaries of their settlements and lived peaceably with practitioners of different beliefs as long as all kept within their own spaces.”¹⁸ Even throughout the initial explosion of urbanization and industrialization across the country, the church provided a sense of home in “the midst of isolation,” particularly in insulating it from “damaging emotionalism of diverse religious movements.”¹⁹ However, it was impossible for these social bases to remain unaltered in the context of a rapidly changing America. What happened, then, when boundaries became blurred and spiritual spaces became unavoidably entangled? In other words, what happened to taken-for-granted social realities in the face of pluralism?

¹⁸ Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 23.

¹⁹ McSwain, “Sociological Context,” 201.

Section 2: Changing Worlds

It cannot be denied that Americans have experienced a dramatic increase in the choices available to them since the Industrial Revolution. In his 2014 book, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*, Peter Berger argues that the contemporary world is one characterized by modernity. He defines this modernity as a time of ever-increasing change caused by scientific and technological revolutions, beginning with the Industrial Revolution and continuing into the present day. Berger argues that modernity brings with it a wider array of choices than we had pre-Industrial Revolution. We are no longer forced to align ourselves with the beliefs and lifestyle that we were born into. Rather, we are encouraged, and at times forced, to make choices about what we want our lives to be. As Berger puts it, “modernization leads to huge transformation in the human condition from fate to choice.”²⁰ Because of this transition to an emphasis on choice, we are living through the constant process of “redefining who the individual is in the context of the seemingly endless possibilities presented by modernity.”²¹

Pluralism, as defined by Berger, is a “social situation in which people with different ethnicities, worldviews, and moralities live together peacefully and interact with each other amicably.”²² Although the “peaceful” and “amicable” notions present in this definition are at times extremely fraught, the melting-pot nature of the American dream theoretically encourages a diversity of thought and lived experiences to coalesce and form a society of free-thinking individuals. In terms of religious faith, America is now more pluralist than it ever has been. The majority of communities are no longer centered around a singular church. Nowadays, there are

²⁰ Peter Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 2014), 5.

²¹ Berger, *Many Altars*, 5.

²² Berger, *Many Altars*, 1.

not only multitudes of Christian churches across different denominations to choose from, but also a wealth of religions outside of the Christian tradition. This is not to say that such religious traditions as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the wide variety of faith options encompassing America did not exist before modernity, but the ease of access to learning about and joining such traditions has greatly increased. The advent of social media and easy communication across the country and the globe have, in some ways, reduced the need for a central, material worship space altogether. Gone are the days when the faith of residents of small towns was defined strictly by their church attendance. This type of pluralism, as defined by Berger, has undoubtedly and unprecedentedly altered the American religious landscape.²³

Generational Breakdown

As previously introduced, Robert Wuthnow's *After Heaven* tracks the changes to spirituality that many Americans experienced during the latter half of the twentieth century. Specifically, he focuses on the shift from a spirituality of dwelling to a spirituality of seeking. The former emphasizes the importance of sacred spaces, places where spirituality can be easily identified and practiced, as stable markers to gather around. Communities are structured around a church or central worship space, and community guidelines issue individual members with predefined roles to inhabit throughout their lives and rules of behavior within those roles. For example, the predefined roles popular in the 1950s may have been "head of the household" for men and "homemaker" for women. Although the hindsight provided by a more pluralist, progressive society may encourage us to see these limited options as constraining, importantly,

²³ The pluralism being defined here is not exactly the same as the type of pluralism in the current conversations surrounding inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism. For the purposes of this paper, the term applies primarily to Berger's definition of people from different perspectives interacting with one another.

dwelling-oriented spirituality can also foster a strong sense of security and stability. In providing a kind of blueprint for each person's life, the fact of there being a community as a whole takes away the individual anxieties that may come with asking questions such as "what am I going to do with my life?" Those who clung to this sense of stability would find immense value in it during the turbulent years to come, but others would choose to break free of constraining communities in favor of charting their own path.

The "spirituality of seeking" Wuthnow describes prioritizes individual choice within spirituality. This seeking-oriented spirituality gained prevalence from the 1960s-2000s amidst a quickly changing world. The explosion of social revolutions which emphasized the importance of freedom and self-expression — from the birth of the hippie to strides in women's liberation to the Civil Rights Movement — caused a shift in the generations born during these periods toward a more seeking-oriented spirituality. The beginning of a heavily consumer-oriented culture led to religion's becoming part of the greater market, with people being able to "shop" for their religious beliefs and faiths aiming to "sell" themselves well. The political unrest of wars abroad and battles at home caused Americans to be unsettled in their lives, a phenomenon which propagated an unsettled spirituality.

In this new spiritual world, "faith [was] no longer something people inherit[ed] but something for which they strive[d]." ²⁴ Both one's personal faith and the role they chose to play in society were no longer predefined, but instead were created by piecing together what worked best for the individual. These newly defined roles constantly evolved as individuals were free to discover and explore what worked best for their personal needs throughout different phases of their lives. Of course, this shift did not happen overnight, nor did it occur for everyone.

Wuthnow argues that dwelling and seeking are a continuum, rather than two distinct options, and

²⁴ Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 8.

that individuals may slide across this continuum throughout their life. However, even the presence of spiritual options in general provided Americans with something those growing up in the 1950s could never have imagined.

The Pew Research Religious Landscape study presents an analysis of the importance of different aspects of religious faith among generational cohorts, highlighting the quantitative impact of shifting spirituality on the American religious landscape.²⁵ According to this survey, 69% of baby boomers believe in God with absolute certainty, while only 50% of younger millennials do. Fifty nine percent of baby boomers, but only 38% of younger millennials, classify religion as a “very important” factor of their lives.²⁶ Most of the other categories pertaining to religion as an essential factor in one’s life and daily activities follow a similar pattern of positive percentages declining between the Baby Boomer and Younger Millennial generation. Furthermore, as of 2021, about three-in-ten American adults identified as religiously unaffiliated, a percentage that is up 13% from 2007.²⁷ With these trends continuing to grow in prominence, even those who still find home in their faith may be drifting away from the strictly organized institutions and communities of the past.²⁸

It seems that as Americans are presented with more options for belief, they are leaning away from the taken-for-granted Christian plausibility structures of previous generations,

²⁵ “The Generation Guide - Millennials, Gen X, Y, Z and Baby Boomers,” Four Hooks, Marketing Blog, last modified April 26, 2015, <http://fourhooks.com/marketing/the-generation-guide-millennials-gen-x-y-z-and-baby-boomers-art5910718593/>.

²⁶ “Religious Landscape Study: Generational Cohort,” Pew Research Center, 2007, <http://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/generational-cohort/>.

²⁷ Gregory A. Smith, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

²⁸ This is obviously not the case for every baby boomer and younger millennial, nor is it the case for every Southern Baptist, Christian, or religious person in general. However, these trends point to a shared experience among some members of these groups that can be analyzed.

including the Southern Baptist structures which my grandparents value.²⁹ To put it bluntly, the SBC is destabilizing from the institution it once was because of the trends across generational religiosity highlighted by Pew. Even though Southern Baptist associations often remain strong in non-metropolitan areas, they are faced with new challenges in a new world, and even those once-rural areas are slowly being exposed to more diversity.³⁰ Pew Research statistics on members of the SBC emphasize this point, as 39% of members of the convention are baby boomers, while only 7% of members are younger millennials, with a significant drop in membership from Generation X to Older Millennials. 2022 saw a decrease in membership of the SBC by nearly half a million people, continuing a steady decline in membership since its peak in 2006.³¹ Although this does not necessarily mean that people are losing the Southern Baptist faith, it does show a decline in the church congregation as an essential part of maintaining that faith. As members die or leave the church, the SBC is not drawing in enough new members to maintain or increase congregation sizes. The strong plausibility structures once offered by a society based around the propagation of a church are being destabilized.

Although I cannot chalk up the communication issues I experience with my grandparents to simple generational differences, the context that these trends of shifting spirituality provide is essential to understanding my relationship and communication with them better. Wuthnow claims that dwelling-oriented, taken-for-granted social bases were at a peak around the 1950s in

²⁹ For clarity of understanding generational statistics, the strict generational breakdown is as follows: greatest (1901-1924), silent (1924-1945), baby boomer (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980). The lines between generations become more blurred after Generation X, but it is generally accepted that millennials occupy the time between 1985-1995 or the early 2000s, Generation Z reaching between 2000 and 2010, and anyone born after 2010 being referred to as Generation Alpha.

³⁰ McSwain, "Sociological Context," 208.

³¹ David Roach, "Southern Baptists Lost Nearly Half a Million Members Last Year," *Christianity Today*, May 12, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/may/southern-baptist-membership-drop-baptism-rebound-sbc.html>.

America, paralleling the time period in which my grandparents were children. Therefore, it is highly likely that they would have spent their formative years of childhood entrenched in these taken-for-granted, tightly knit, church-oriented social bases. At the very least, it is likely that they are nostalgic for the security that this time period provided.

In contrast, I was raised enveloped in the piecemeal structures of seeking-oriented spirituality. Wuthnow's analysis ended a few years before I was born in 2002, but the shifts he discusses have affected me nonetheless. Like so many children of the 1960s and 70s, my mother found herself rejecting the dwelling-oriented spirituality that she experienced growing up. Instead of seeing it as the stable life my grandparents likely did, my mother found it stifling, and chose to live and raise her child in a more open household. Therefore, I was raised in a far more pluralist environment than my grandparents were, not only because of the time in which I was born, but also because of the specific choices that were made in my religious upbringing to be *unlike* what my grandparents valued. I certainly have taken-for-granted plausibility structures, but they have been formed and sustained within the context of a publicly pluralist America.³² Rather than having to adapt to the changing world as my grandparents have, my sacred canopy has been able to flourish in a world that has watered it from the very start. The sacred canopy of my grandparents, by contrast, has likely withered in an America that no longer totally supports the 1950's-era taken-for-granted social bases formed around Christian churches.

All of these stories and statistics indicate that we are living in a pluralist society where an emphasis on individual choice has led to the steady spread of personalized spirituality and a shift away from predefined roles. It is a society where congregations can no longer be sustained by the

³² Here, "publicly" pluralist is used to highlight that America was always pluralist in the sense that diversity (in religious faith, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc) has always existed. However, it was often confined to the shadows of American public life, but never quite brought to the forefront, likely due to fear of harassment or general lack of support. In recent years, diversity has begun to be celebrated and endorsed in American public life, allowing for this "public" pluralism.

power of generational value transmission alone, as individuals no longer have to stay in a community based around religious values to avoid complete isolation. The decline in religiosity has had consequences and affected the plausibility structures upon which the religious traditions of my grandparent's early lives relied. However, something Wuthnow fails to account for is the trickle-down effect that these massive shifts in spirituality caused. It is probable that the trends occurred first in more diverse cities before reaching non-urban settings, a fact which greatly impacts both me and my grandparents.

Regional Breakdown

Recent data collected by Pew Research Center on religious breakdown by geographical area reveals the distinct ways in which religion can differ from city to countryside. Although the study is broken down by American region, state, and major metropolitan areas, I have chosen two areas that I believe are most indicative of this difference: New York City, the largest metropolis in the United States that has been welcoming a diversity of people since the founding of the country, and South Carolina, a state within the Bible Belt where my grandparents reside, which is slowly moving towards urbanization but maintaining heavy Christian roots throughout the process. Adults in the New York City metropolitan area were found to be 59% Christian (33% of whom are Catholic and only 9% of whom are Evangelical Protestant), 16% non-Christian faiths, and 24% unaffiliated.³³ In contrast, adults in South Carolina were found to be 78% Christian (35% of whom are Evangelical Protestant), 3% non-Christian faiths, and 19% unaffiliated.³⁴

³³ "Religious Landscape Study: Adults in the New York City metro area," Pew Research Center, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/metro-area/new-york-city-metro-area/>.

³⁴ "Religious Landscape Study: Adults in South Carolina," Pew Research Center, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/state/south-carolina/>. Interestingly, 15% of unaffiliated in NYC and 14% of unaffiliated in SC were categorized as "nothing in particular," pointing to the rise of the nones that was previously discussed.

According to this study, 20% more adults in South Carolina are Christian than adults in New York City, with a substantial difference in the popularity of Christian denominations, as well. When considering size differences between the two areas, the numbers are put in stark contrast with one another. Although South Carolina has a smaller population size than New York City, geographically, it is much larger. Still, only 3% of people in the entire state of South Carolina identify with a non-Christian faith. Therefore, it would be much more difficult to spontaneously interact with someone from a non-Christian religious tradition. On the other hand, New York City's population of 16% non-Christian faiths are all localized within a relatively small region.

These statistics point to the idea that cities are often more religiously diverse than rural states are, with city residents experiencing dramatic social shifts sooner than their rural counterparts do. A Baby Boomer in New York City will likely have had more exposure to different opinions than a Baby Boomer in suburban or rural South Carolina. Therefore, they will likely be more willing to accept opinions other than their own, or at least have thought about their own beliefs. Thus, they have a greater ability to defend their beliefs against outside, anomic forces, because such forces are unavoidable in daily life. Obviously, not everyone in a city is approaching strangers and having deep conversations about morality and religious faith. However, it is quite likely that a walk down the street in a city such as New York City will feature a wide variety of ways of life. Images such as two men kissing or a woman wearing a hijab will be as likely as someone wearing a cross necklace. The very sight of diversity makes it very difficult to deny its existence, and helps humanize marginalized communities in a way that makes it more difficult to theorize negatively about them. Living in South Carolina, my grandparents are simply not exposed to a wealth of diversity unless they actively seek it out.

With generational and regional shifts in mind, it is obvious that my grandparents and I have had extremely different experiences of the world and religion. While the communication problems that occur between us cannot be attributed merely to a generational divide or their living in a more rural area – as previously discussed, there are plenty of older people who live in non-urban environments that are entirely more accepting and willing to engage in conversation than my grandparents – they are still extremely important in understanding why we operate with such different views of the world.

Plausibility structures are weakened when there are not enough factors outside of an institution to maintain belief in a world's objective reality. For example, if someone is only exposed to the world of Christianity twice a week at church, and there are little to no outside social institutions that support that world, then that social base is inherently weak. With this in mind, we can understand why Christians and members of other religious faiths who are involved in an inescapably pluralist American society have weaker plausibility structures and social realities than the members of the isolated towns of the past. Pluralism “relativizes and thereby undermines many of the certainties by which human beings used to live,” especially with regard to religious certainty.³⁵ In a world where even neighbors and family members may have entirely different religious beliefs, plausibility structures are constantly threatened. Yet, religious life in America is still an extremely powerful force. It is obvious that a majority of people, even those who may structure their faith differently now than they would have fifty years ago, are not interested in losing their faith entirely. People like my grandparents are managing to hold onto the social bases which are no longer being supported by the country at large. This begs the question, how are they doing so, and what potential consequences does this clinging have?

³⁵ Berger, *Many Altars*, 9.

Section 3: When Worlds Collide

Peter Berger outlines two main responses to pluralism: relativism and fundamentalism. Relativism is simply an embrace of the pluralist modernity we find ourselves to be a part of.³⁶ It is the response of someone who accepts that the world is different (and not always worse) than it was fifty years ago, and who chooses to find their way within this acceptance. Fundamentalism, by contrast, is “an effort to restore the threatened certainty” of the once taken-for-granted worldviews.³⁷ “Fundamentalist” in this context does not necessarily refer to the religious fundamentalism which often stresses literal interpretation of scripture and living by those interpretations. Rather, it is the attempt to return to the “fundamentals” of a traditional world, to alleviate the uncertainty and threat of choice that pluralism presents.

The primary issue with pluralism that fundamentalist attitudes seek to address is the fact that the “rapid rate of change in recent generations is unique in history and destabilizes enduring values. Legitimation is more difficult in the context of unprecedented change.”³⁸ Berger argues that situations such as “natural catastrophe, war, or social upheaval” oftentimes “provide massive threats to the reality previously taken for granted.”³⁹ In a modern context of constant change and progress, accompanied by seemingly ever-increasing strife and worries, there is often great social upheaval that threatens once taken-for-granted social bases and their previously ironclad legitimations.

Interaction in a pluralist society — a society in which “people with different ethnicities, worldviews, and moralities live together peacefully and interact with each other amicably” — is

³⁶ Berger, *Many Altars*, 11.

³⁷ Berger, *Many Altars*, 9.

³⁸ James Luther Adams and Thomas Mikelson, “Legitimation,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones, (Detroit: Thomas Gale, 1987) 5398.

³⁹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 44.

extremely different from interaction within taken-for-granted social realities.⁴⁰ Pre-theoretical legitimations (legitimations which rely on tradition to justify current patterns of behavior) crumple when there is no shared social structure to rely upon, a situation that has become prevalent with the rise of a pluralist America. In terms of older generations, baby boomers and preceding generations are largely used to accepting objectivated meanings as conclusive for their content, using sources like tradition and scripture to legitimate their values and beliefs. If some baby boomers are so used to their social reality being taken for granted, they have no ready-made responses to highly empirical questions about their faith. However, they are now living in a world where they are constantly being faced with arguments that are based on personal experiences, ones that often endeavor to think about and analyze the consequences of certain religious beliefs more critically.

This Bergarian framework of pluralist interaction can help explain many problematic cases of unproductive communication, conversations with my own grandparents included. No one is exempt from the processes of world construction and maintenance that Berger outlines. Both my grandparents and I experience processes of world construction and maintain the worlds we live in through legitimations and plausibility structures, and there is nothing wrong with that. The problem lies in the fact that we grew up in different societies that formed worlds which are incompatible with one another. When these worlds — and the legitimations that help propagate them — collide in a pluralist society, it is extremely difficult to reconcile opposing views.

For example, my grandparents can claim that “nobody was gay back in the day” not because this was a fact, but because in the society they were raised in, the few gay people who were able to accept their identity lived their lives in private. However, in recent years my grandparents have lived through the social upheaval caused by the LGBTQ+ community

⁴⁰ Berger, *Many Altars*, 1.

demanding and gaining space for themselves in the public eye — a phenomenon that I grew up during and viewed as completely normal. The prevalence and pride of open members of the LGBTQ+ community which abound in contemporary society is completely taken for granted by me. At the same time, it presents a major challenge to my grandparents' preconceived and once taken-for-granted picture of the world. Nowadays, my grandparents must construct more narratives that explain and justify their problematic opinions on the LGBTQ+ community in the face of evidence that these opinions are harmful to me, their own family. It is often at this point in the conversation, when I begin using the experiences of myself and others to justify my ideas, that I encounter an impassable wall.

To reiterate, when I present my grandparents with the idea that organized religion has harmed members of the LGBTQ+ community, I am creating an argument based on my own legitimations, legitimations that directly conflict with those of my grandparents. Both of these legitimations, although they help maintain and re-propagate our own worlds, may often appear bizarre and unconvincing to outsiders. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to have disagreements of this nature, especially when religious faith as intensely strong as my grandparents' is concerned. How do you argue with someone about what they find sacred? How do you challenge the ideas that form the basis of someone's entire world?

I cannot necessarily argue against what my grandparents consider to be sacred, but it is just as hard for them to deny my own lived experiences, particularly because I am someone to whom they are in close proximity. I am someone my grandparents care about deeply and have fond memories of, but I now present a threat to their way of understanding the world. The upbringings of my grandparents have in no way prepared them to defend their values against the epistemic anomaly that is my very existence and my refusal to remain silent about my opinions.

Challenging taken-for-granted beliefs in this way, bringing arguments down to a more human and experiential level, would make maintaining the more problematic and harmful beliefs of my grandparents much more difficult. Theoretical debates may not be able to change peoples' minds, but witnessing the pain and testimony of real people can. However, fundamentalists fear this fact rather than embrace it. The Bergerian fundamentalist, who seeks to return to traditional worlds of taken-for-granted values, would see phenomena with the power to change minds as the very things threatening the social certainty which they seek to restore. The result of their fear of change has potentially dire consequences for communication.

Socio-Engineered Structures

Berger claims that if the social base necessary to form a strong, taken-for-granted social reality is not present, it is also possible to fabricate, or socio-engineer, one.⁴¹ Instead of an entire society serving as a plausibility structure, people may create their own sub-societies to serve as the social bases for their belief. This is not a new phenomenon, as humans have been socio-engineering their own plausibility structures for centuries as a way of dealing with dissent from the outside world. In the past, the “physical destruction of deviant individuals or groups” was an effective strategy often favored by religious groups, such as Christians defending their faith during the Crusades.⁴² It was also often possible to physically segregate different groups of people, ensuring that outsiders did not affect the sacred of each individual group in any impactful ways. However, once groups come into a pluralistic competition or marketplace of ideas, it “may become quite difficult to either kill off or quarantine the deviant worlds.”⁴³ Modern moral codes of conduct and laws in America make it inadvisable and extremely difficult to conduct this

⁴¹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 48.

⁴² Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 48-49.

⁴³ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 49.

physical segregation or annihilation on a scale large enough to completely isolate an ideology. Therefore, we have seen a shift from physical separation of deviant ideologies to a sort of mental separation, a refusal to truly engage with ideas that could potentially destabilize the plausibility structures of any one group. If ideas are kept segregated, pluralism becomes less of a threat.

Socio-engineering in this manner highlights an in-group to be trusted and an out-group to be shunned. In *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas claims that what individuals consider to be “dirt” is simply matter out of place. In more theoretical terms, something that is dirty or polluted is a contravention of an established order that is socially created and maintained.⁴⁴ Individuals shun the polluted elements of culture because of the threat they present to the social order — in other words, the potential they have to destabilize plausibility structures and the social realities they propagate. In this way, groups attempt to avoid “cognitive contamination,” or the idea that “if people keep talking with each other, they will influence each other.”⁴⁵ In the case of communication with my grandparents, my own experiential arguments discussed in the previous section would be considered to be a polluting force, even if neither of us consciously recognize this fact. This is why my grandparents are resistant to the arguments I present them with, and why others may have similar experiences: those clinging to new, socio-engineered social bases are attempting to avoid the cognitive contamination that threatens their very way of life. Those who have the potential to pollute structures, and their “dirty” ideas, are not truly engaged with. Those who adopt this outlook and behavior are attempting to achieve the aforementioned fundamentalist goal of restoring the certainty that is threatened by pluralism.

The fundamentalist response with regard to communication does not stop here. These groups that fear being “plunged into the vortex of the pluralist dynamic” are not only intolerant

⁴⁴ Mary Douglas, “Secular Defilement,” in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002) 36.

⁴⁵ Berger, *Many Altars*, 2.

of the ideas presented by theoretical arguments against their faith, but they also seek to simultaneously propagate their own religious beliefs.⁴⁶ In this new world, “the tradition is not simply given, they have chosen it,” and because of this they are “aggressive in the same measure as they are vulnerable.”⁴⁷ In other words, they may realize on some level that the foundations of their belief are not the strongest. Therefore, they often choose to go on the offensive in conversation, rather than only defending their beliefs. Ironically, however, those who so often expect their evangelizing to be met with support and acceptance just as often refuse to give the same courtesy to others, instead being intolerant of hearing views opposing their own.

For example, the Southern Baptist Convention's official Faith and Message states that Southern Baptists are living “in an age increasingly hostile to Christian truth,” highlighting their faith as the “truth” that others will attempt to overturn.⁴⁸ This statement reveals one way in which the SBC is trying to socio-engineer new plausibility structures. The portrayal of Southern Baptists as being under threat crafts a highly theoretical legitimation (one which seeks to fit seemingly opposing realities within a grander narrative). By claiming that beliefs opposing those propagated by the SBC as invalid and malicious in nature, the narrative is crafted that in a pluralist society, the SBC has become the minority, the victim of outsider hostility that seeks to destroy sacred truth. This creates a mentality of “us” versus “them,” where members of the convention must seek to block out all opposition as a way of protecting this truth. By invalidating outsider opinions and painting those outsiders as enemies, Southern Baptists are altogether encouraged to shut down communication with those who may pose a threat.

⁴⁶ Berger, *Many Altars*, 15.

⁴⁷ Berger, *Many Altars*, 10.

⁴⁸ “The Baptist Faith and Message,” Southern Baptist Convention, 2000, <https://bfm.sbc.net/>.

The Problem of Polarization

In his essay “Problems of Polarization,” political philosopher Robert Talisse outlines the phenomenon of belief polarization as one that occurs when like-minded individuals gather and talk about shared ideas.⁴⁹ Through this process, their beliefs become more extreme, or are “polarized.” Polarization is not something that individuals seek out. Rather, it is something that may happen to any individual as they engage in what may appear to be everyday conversation. As such, it must be understood that belief polarization can happen anywhere and for anyone extremely easily. Even those relativists who embrace pluralism could be subject to it, and may find themselves proudly stating they believe no distinct groups in society should exist at all after having a rallying conversation with their fellow relativists.

It is easy to see how my grandparents, as well as other members of their generation and regional setting, may be particularly susceptible to unwitting polarization. My grandparents are retired, and live in a relatively secluded area. Therefore, they are not forced to interact with people they do not choose to on an everyday basis at their job, nor do they experience such interaction while walking about in a city environment. They spend the majority of their time with their friends from Sunday school and church. This makes perfect sense, as their fellow church-goers live in the area and hold the same general values as my grandparents, so they are easy and friendly conversation partners. Robert Wuthnow himself points out how “our personal identity is reinforced by our friends. Our opinions and beliefs are, too.”⁵⁰ However, it becomes a problem when my grandparents are only interacting with like-minded individuals, as it creates a situation of constant reassurance where belief polarization is inevitable.

⁴⁹ Robert B Talisse, “Problems of Polarization,” in *Political Epistemology*, eds., Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 209-225.

⁵⁰ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 117.

Adding further interest to this phenomenon is the fact that although SBC membership has been steadily decreasing, the percentages for small group attendance at Southern Baptist churches has risen. Members of SBC seem to be reaching out for groups of like-minded individuals with whom to share conversation about topics that interest them. This sense of community is a point of pride for many churches. However, lack of interaction with individuals outside of that community can easily lead into a cycle of polarization.

There are also aspects of their reality that my grandparents curate actively, though without realizing the polarizing effect their actions will have. I can recall an instance where they spoke about watching a new television show on a streaming service, and after seeing two women kissing in the first minutes of the show, decided to turn the program off and watch something else. They are not making the active commitment to broadening the diversity in their lives as so many activists encourage, and although they have a right to do so, it does plunge them deeper into the polarized cycle.

I myself am not immune to the theories of polarization Talisse describes. Although as a college student, I am currently being passively exposed to the most diversity I ever will be, I still keep my circle of extended interaction enclosed around people who already agree with me. Sensitive subjects of debate between my good friends and I are often avoided. If engaged at all, they are approached with immense caution, and nothing is truly said out of fear of offending the other person or souring the relationship. Especially now that I am an upperclassman taking courses all directly correlated with my major – and largely with people whom I already know – I am being exposed to less diversity of opinion than I may have been while exploring general education requirements and meeting hoards of new people my first year. I have found my clique, and we polarize one another in the echo chamber of our coexistence.

Though social media may seem like a promising option for being fed a wealth of diverse images and perspectives, the polarization of algorithms stunts this. My grandparents choose whom to follow and friend on their few accounts. Thus, they can ensure their circle of interest remains confined to those they agree with. I have actively unfollowed people whose political opinions I disagree with, citing that it was to protect my mental health and peace, and I would wager many people would have similar experiences. Algorithms will learn what we like, and feed us more of the same, allowing us to exist in a sort of taken-for-granted social reality on apps that we believe are connecting us with the entire world.

I would infer, then, that as my grandparents entrench themselves within their socio-engineered social base, where they shut out ideas and perhaps people who pose threats to their sacred canopy, they are experiencing polarization of the beliefs so sacred to these structures. When statements are never questioned by those they spend the most time around, soon their invented, largely pre-theoretical legitimations become more real to them. The more often my grandparents interact with members of their socio-engineered structures, the more they become unaccustomed to facing the threat of my existence, and the more extreme their legitimations to explain away my existence become. In turn, they will become less receptive to engaging in productive conversations, where they at the very least accept the validity of another person's opinion, even if they do not agree. As Talisse asserts:

Individuals who have been belief polarized are also more prone to the “backfire effect”; when a belief they hold on the basis of their group identity is contradicted by someone perceived to be outside the relevant group, their confidence in the challenged belief intensifies – they come to hold the belief more ardently.⁵¹

At a certain point within the polarization cycle, it becomes extremely difficult for new ideas to break through. Perhaps my grandparents have been so polarized by their community, and I have

⁵¹ Talisse, “Problems of Polarization,” 218.

been in turn by my own, that we are unable to truly listen to one another anymore. This idea certainly feels like an accurate description of our conversations from my perspective, as they often come screeching to a halt when it becomes obvious that neither side is willing to shift their opinions at all. Still, I believe there is an even deeper sort of polarization occurring with my grandparents.

My grandparents have not only been polarized by their socio-engineered community, but also by their faith itself. Wuthnow tracks a subtle shift in the kinds of spiritual discipline invoked by those who considered themselves to be spiritual in the 1980s, one that moved “away from behavioral norms and focused instead on reassurance.”⁵² Moral behavior was being pushed by politicians, spiritual leaders, and the general public, but it seemed that very few were interested in explicitly stating what such moral behavior actually consisted of. Instead, people used their spirituality as a way of reassuring themselves they were doing the right thing, no matter what the actual content of those “right things” entailed. People were less often seeking divine guidance in the way they should act, and more so communing with the divine in order to lift their own spirits or see the inherent goodness in the people they interacted with. In moments of high stress or just the day-to-day decisions of life, those who sought divine reassurance often “were unable to say they had done anything differently as a result of being spiritually disciplined, but by having brought God into the picture at least momentarily they felt better about themselves.”⁵³

In Wuthnow’s accounts of his interviews with everyday people, there is firsthand evidence of religion legitimating their worldview. Preconceived opinions about what to do, say, or believe are legitimated by bringing God into the picture and using God as a sacred form of

⁵² Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 101.

⁵³ Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 102.

reassurance. Prescriptions about what constituted moral behavior was seen as second nature to religious adherents, and was therefore left largely unmonitored by higher authorities within religious structures. This phenomenon, in addition to the general lack of encouragement to question and analyze the morality of actions in accordance with the broader themes of one's religion or spirituality, could cause people to feel justified in immoral behavior and belief. In other words, when divine reassurance is at play, problematic beliefs and behaviors left unchecked by a greater human authority are cemented by an individual's own idea of what a divine figure values.

Once again, none of us is immune to Berger's theories of worlds. I can recount many times in which reassurance of my preconceived worldview was essential for my own functioning. There have been countless experiences with my therapist where I only wanted to recount my experiences and have them legitimated from an uninvolved third party (I go to her and I say "I just need you to tell me I'm not crazy"). I would wager that many people could recall similar moments of need for reassurance. It feels good, and at times necessary, to have our views of the world legitimated by something outside of ourselves. It gives us an especially strong sense of stability in our worldview when that reassurance comes from a source as infallible and eternal as something we consider to be divine. Finding this reassurance in religion is not a problem in and of itself. It is a fundamental part of maintaining the inherently precarious worlds that are required for the stable existence of societies. However, it becomes problematic when religion is the only source of legitimation acknowledged. Spirituality is something deeply personal, which has the ability to create beautiful intersections and fruitful conversations, but it also creates the opportunity for individual members of various religious organizations to become too conservative or too liberal with the official views stated in scripture. If someone believes

everything they are doing is justified by something sacred, then there is little that outsiders can do to convince them to act differently.

The Repercussions of Refusal

Those creating socio-engineered structures can no longer rely on the types of legitimations that Berger argues are so important to maintaining the processes of world construction and the strength of plausibility structures. Therefore, they have to rely on or invent new legitimations that never had to be considered in the past. They are operating out of their own, new plausibility structures that encourage them to shield themselves from outsider opinions.

In the case of my grandparents, their arguments highlight how they have formed new legitimations to help explain and justify their own social order to themselves, particularly in regard to the more problematic parts of this order that our contemporary world has rightly taken issue with. It is no secret that the Southern Baptist Convention “possesses a domineering, fear-based theology that is unsurprisingly patriarchal and harmful to women, as well as to marginalized groups, such as those in the LGBTQ+ communities.”⁵⁴ The church has come under fire repeatedly in recent years for their promotion of bigoted beliefs, from sexism to racism to homophobia. Yet, my grandparents are able to proudly attend a Southern Baptist church and simultaneously boldly proclaim their lack of these bigoted ideas.

I can recall a conversation with them – the very dinner table argument which inspired this paper’s topic – in which my grandmother claimed in a conversation about school shootings that “kids were under too much stress nowadays, with all of these transgenders” and such. She

⁵⁴ McAbee, Donovan, “The Southern Baptist Convention’s Long War for the Patriarchy,” *Time*, June 20, 2023, <https://time.com/6287984/southern-baptist-conventions-patriarchy/>.

seemed to be making a claim of correlation between the presence of transgender people and school shootings. When I started to question the validity of my grandmother's claim, arguing myself that organized religion has likely put LGBTQ+ youths under more stress and harm than questions of gender identity ever could, my grandparents did something very interesting. They came to the defense of their faith by telling me that a "man who likes to wear high heels" is accepted at their church. In their eyes, this man's existence made it impossible for them to be homophobic or transphobic. Even more so, the existence of this man makes their church (and perhaps their faith as a whole) exempt from any criticism of the values it endorses. It legitimates their world, yet remains completely unconvincing to me.

It may be easy for people like my grandparents to attempt to refute the harm of their church's deeply rooted yet unspoken values by claiming that they, as individuals, are not using their authority to outright harm people, which is true. My grandparents do not attend the Westboro Baptist Church, which is notorious for being outspoken on their anti-LGBTQ+ values. As far as I know, they do not attend protests against the progressive values I uphold, nor have they bluntly stated oppressive ideals to me, such as "homosexuality is a sin."

At the same time, it is difficult for my grandparents to accept the harm that structures like their church may cause. Accepting criticism about sacred belief threatens to break down their faith. Conversations like the anecdote above make it obvious that they want to hold their versions of problematic opinions while not admitting to themselves or others that those opinions are problematic. Therefore, they have invented new legitimations to prop up the more difficult-to-grapple-with portions of their social base.

YouTube creator Natalie Wynn, under the stylized username "ContraPoints," highlights this more subtle form of bigotry in her video essay analyzing the transphobic content produced

by author J.K. Rowling in recent years. With specific reference to bigotry against the LGBTQ+ community, Wynn points out how “openly contemptuous” bigotry that is “manifested in slurs, in outright discrimination, in demonizing the target group, in calls for shunning, subordination, or even violence” has declined in popularity recently.⁵⁵ Perhaps because of the more outwardly accepting environment that pluralism invites and the potential political and social consequences of being labeled an outright bigot, people now are less likely to proudly state their values which society at large has deemed incorrect. However, this does not mean that bigotry has ceased to exist. Instead, Wynn argues that it had been repopularized in a more indirect form. This so-called indirect bigotry “manifests as ‘concern’, or ‘debate’ about a host of proxy issues. It’s often “defensive” in tone rather than offensive.”⁵⁶ An example of this form of indirect bigotry may be something along the lines of the following:

Of course I love gay people, some of my best friends struggle with same-sex attraction. But it's not ‘homophobic’ to not want LGBT ideology promoted in schools to children as young as three years old. Why, it's a full on assault on religious liberty!⁵⁷

In watching this section of Wynn’s video, I was struck with the realization that I have had this exact conversation with my grandparents multiple times. Placing yourself on the defense from an activist “gone too far” is an effective strategy in ending conversation, because it is difficult to reason with or respond to. Wynn points out how this form of bigotry may be even more dangerous than the direct form, because of the way it is so subtle, so hard to argue against, and so easily integrated within the public consciousness.

This new form of defensive, indirect bigotry could be an example of a new legitimization formed by my grandparents to explain and justify their own social order, while also making it

⁵⁵ Natalie Wynn, “Transcripts / J.K. Rowling,” ContraPoints, last modified January 26, 2021, <https://www.contrapoints.com/transcripts/jk-rowling>.

⁵⁶ Wynn, “Transcripts / J.K. Rowling.”

⁵⁷ Wynn, “Transcripts / J.K. Rowling.”

extremely difficult to argue against, thereby solidifying their socio-engineered plausibility structures against the threats posed by activists “gone too far.” This form of indirect bigotry is most interesting in the fact that it is so difficult to engage with in real conversation. The polarization, both of immediate contacts and of divine reassurance, validates people like my grandparents in forming these new legitimations.

Considering this section, it is obvious that I have also formed my own legitimation in response to my grandparents’. My long-held belief that “my grandparents are rather close-minded” is legitimated by my entire exploration of and argument surrounding indirect bigotry. My research into how their views may be bigoted is a way of justifying the feelings that I have about them. While my own legitimations are plenty effective for me, as well as others who hold values similar to my own, these explanations are likely bizarre to my grandparents. We are both so entrenched within our own social bases that, when our worlds inevitably collide, they bounce off of one another entirely. The repercussions of refusal to truly listen to other perspectives is that our conversations are unproductive, our relationship has been irrevocably fractured, and we both often leave experience with one another feeling hurt and misunderstood.

To summarize, in seeking to maintain the stability of their belief system in the midst of a world which constantly threatens to topple it, my grandparents have crafted their own social base to support their plausibility structures. This socio-engineered structure maintains itself primarily by blocking out potentially polluting factors and encouraging polarization of belief, which I experience as a refusal to truly listen to and engage with the opinions I present them with. What is still to be considered is why they are so insistent on remaining in this system, and what greater harm their actions could propagate.

The Danger of Deconstruction

My grandparents have begun retreating into socio-engineered, belief-isolated plausibility structures because the rules of the game of debate have irrevocably changed. While they once were able to engage in arguments while removing themselves from the personal aspects of the conversation and speaking theoretically (in the sense that they did not have to consider the practical application of the subjects they were discussing), they are now forced to engage more with stories of personal experiences and emotions that were once considered too irrational to be used as strong evidence for any argument. To accept the experiences of the people around them – people who are more often than not well-known to them – they would have to accept the consequences of their belief, the harm that it may have caused in the real world. The stories and experiential arguments that are often being presented to them through outlets such as social media and their own grandchildren are difficult to reconcile with their taken-for-granted picture of the world. Furthermore, acceptance of these stories has the potential to obliterate their plausibility structures and plunge them into the chaos of placelessness.

In an article for *The Christian Century*, Brian Bantum recounts how his experiences with these experiential arguments led to the deconstruction of his faith. He was exposed to such arguments during his time at college, where professors and peers challenged him on his views of the world. His first response to hearing an opinion contrary to the one he had, up until that point, taken for granted, mimics much of what we see in religious conversations today. Bantum felt compelled to push back against and disbelieve these arguments, and recounts how he eventually dropped out of the college that questioned his faith entirely, seeking an institution that would serve as a stronger plausibility structure. However, the pushback he experienced continued to come from people he respected, cared about, and wanted to spend time with. Because of this, he

was unable to avoid these “cracks” that were presented to his faith, describing it as a lengthy, unassuming process:

These cracks didn’t come quickly, like a hammer shattering a terra-cotta pot. It was more like a root winding its way under a slab of cement and then simply growing—its slow, steady growth inevitable unless I was going to keep hacking away at the vines beneath the surface.⁵⁸

But Bantum quickly discovered that the vines of deconstruction grow much too rapidly to be fended off forever. This process is exactly what the Christians pushing back against open communication are afraid of. Too many cracks put into people’s faith, too many leaves pulled away from the sacred canopy, too many limbs cut away from its trees, and there will soon be nothing left to shield individuals from the chaos that surrounds the forest.

However, Bantum is still engaging with religious ideas, and is currently a professor at Garrett-Evangelical Theological School. The cracks in his faith did not destroy his appreciation of it entirely. In fact, he now admires these cracks, highlighting their importance when he states that “under every crack there is something that’s growing, something that’s been planted in us.”⁵⁹ Bantum’s story shows that engaging with the theoretical arguments made against fundamentalist religious behavior does not necessarily have to destroy one’s faith entirely. It seems to have operated for Bantum similarly to a controlled burn of the sacred canopy, where debris and undesirable elements are burned away in order to promote the overall health and continued growth of the forest. However, this type of deconstruction is one that many are unwilling to engage with, because of the risk it poses to the overall plausibility structure.

While tracking the previously discussed shifts in spirituality during the late 20th century, Robert Wuthnow conducted many personal interviews with those who had found their faith

⁵⁸ Brian Bantum, “The Roots of My Deconstruction,” *The Christian Century*, December 22, 2022, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/voices/roots-my-deconstruction>.

⁵⁹ Bantum, “The Roots of My Deconstruction.”

affected by the changing spiritual landscape. One of his interviewees, Kim Lacy, expressed to him how she had found and lost a sense of home in her religious faith. After years of her church being her self-described “heaven” and “surrogate family,” a relatively short period of time deeply investigating her faith in response to personal crises led her to a breaking point.⁶⁰ Wuthnow states:

Now, she is no longer able to concentrate on the liturgy. It has ceased to be enough and in questioning it, she has also been forced to think hard about her faith, her role in the church, and the central role that the church has played in her marriage.⁶¹

Her seemingly innocent prodding into her relationship with her faith opened up a can of worms which Lacy did not ask for and was seemingly unprepared for. Overanalysis of the place she called home under the microscope of her own grief and emotional turmoil led to her feeling deeply uncomfortable in the space that had once brought her stability and safety – not just the church itself, but the faith at large. The way that Lacy describes her current relationship with her spirituality is harrowing, as she states that ““...my spirituality is in shreds, essentially’ ...Her voice cracks... ‘right now I just feel like I’m in disarray and disappointment. Not a good place at all.’”⁶²

Both Bantum and Lacy exemplify just how easy and quick it is to lose the basis of one’s faith. Whether inflicted by the people around them or by themselves, simple questions about their relationships with their faith, and the relationship their faith had to the outside world, caused their entire foundation of faith to topple. While Bantum seems to have found peace in this deconstruction, Lacy seems to have unwillingly set fire to her sacred canopy, leaving herself exposed to the elements and dangers that such a canopy once protected her from. This story is

⁶⁰ Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 46.

⁶¹ Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 47.

⁶² Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 47.

one that those as faithful as my grandparents seek to avoid at all costs. If they allow the points that I may make in argument to penetrate their socio-engineered plausibility structure, then the entire system might crumble beneath their feet. The chance of gaining a deeper appreciation or understanding of faith is not worth the potential risk of being plunged into the chaos of placelessness. Choice is a very positive aspect of contemporary life. However, it can also be an extremely overwhelming and destabilizing one, especially for those individuals unaccustomed to experiencing a pluralist world through the lens of relativism. The plausibility structures of today are no longer “enclaves with high walls, where the sacred world is kept pure and well-defended.”⁶³

In one of his famous discussions on religion, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the philosopher David Hume uses fictional characters to craft debates surrounding the nature of God. In the final part of the dialogues, the theist Cleanthes states that humans can easily believe “[a] false, absurd system,” but emphasizes the impossibility of “no system at all.”⁶⁴ Put simply, humans can easily convince themselves of absurd things, but one thing they cannot do is lack a system of belief entirely. My grandparents and others like them can construct highly theoretical legitimations to justify their faith in plausibility structures that conflict with empirical evidence. Perhaps they socio-engineer plausibility structures in this manner *because* they are incapable of giving up on the plausibility structures that have served them for so long. The threat of no system of all, of chaos, drives them to water the sacred canopy that is rapidly dying around them. Because of this necessity and fear, the new walls constructed in forming this canopy will be stronger, higher, and less permeable than even the taken-for-granted plausibility structures of the past.

⁶³ Ammerman “From Canopies to Conversations,” 22.

⁶⁴ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion: With of the Immortality of the Soul, of Suicide, of Miracles*, ed. Richard H. Popkin, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 79.

Section 4: The World As It Is

Through the lens of a Bergerian theoretical framework, I have broken down my grandparents' and my own experiences of the world. I have discovered and documented how it is unlikely that our worlds will ever broach one another, as both sides of the conversation continue to present each other with unconvincing arguments based on our own world-maintaining legitimations. We both enter conversations convinced that we are right, that we are sacred in our quest to correct the other's misgivings about the world as it is.

While presenting an earlier draft of this paper at a conference, I was asked questions akin to these: why should my grandparents listen to me? Why shouldn't the pain and hurt my defiance of their reality likely causes them mean as much to me as the reverse? Why do I need to change *their* mind? These questions are ones I had struggled with through the bulk of my research. If, as German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer claims while speaking about prejudice, "the theme and object of research are actually constituted by the motivation of inquiry," then how could I possibly present a convincing (which in the realms of these questions, often means unbiased and completely rational) argument about something so close to my own heart?⁶⁵ My research has obviously been highly motivated by my personal experiences and goals, and therefore is inherently prejudiced from its inception. Why should I not be viewed as a person on a warpath to prove my grandparents wrong, hiding prejudicial views of them under the guise of theoretical understandings of my situation? I want to make it clear that I have attempted to do this in earnest, but could my own pain have blinded me from experiencing and researching accurately?

At this conference, I answered these questions by presenting the integration of Mary Douglas's theories on social power as an explanation for this conundrum. However, as I was

⁶⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Elements of a Theory of Hermeneutic Experience." In *The Phenomenology Reader*, ed. Timothy Mooney and Dermot Moran (Routledge: New York, 2002), 326.

rambling through an extended answer, I found myself uttering that “they refuse to mold their beliefs to experiences of the world as it is.” The world as it is. In conversation with others after my presentation, I began to see how interesting the concept of “the world as it is” really is. If all of our worlds are socially constructed and maintained, personalized to each individual group that shelters themselves under their own canopy, then how can there be a “world as it is?”

Nonetheless, most of the people I spoke with agreed that my thought of an “objective” world which my grandparents continue to resist was correct. How can this be the case?

Perhaps as we are raised, we find ourselves within the fiction that our experience of the world is objective.⁶⁶ We come into the world and are immediately acculturated into some form of religious imaginary which we then learn to take for granted. It is not until much later that we begin to understand how others’ experiences may be vastly different from our own, and even later when we are able to empathize with those others. As perpetual students, always learning new ways of interacting with the world around us, we are encouraged, required, and at times forced to accept that all experiences of the world have value. We learn how to face the harmful historical structures and contexts which we have helped propagate in our naivety, to apologize and listen and grow, or we learn to shelter ourselves completely against the potential harm we can cause.

Through a Bergerian lens, both my own experience and that of my grandparents (our “worlds”) are completely real, even though they may be completely different from one another. Therefore, I think it is very easy to begin thinking that both experiences of the world are equally valid, that they hold equal weight in analysis, that both sides have an equal share of the work to

⁶⁶ I do not necessarily seek to center this discussion around the philosophical debates on existence and reality. I am focused less on whether objective reality actually exists and more so focused on whether we can have experiences that are categorized as/considered to be objective. Is it possible for us to have experiences of the world that are objective? Is it possible to have a version of the story that is “correct”?

do in communicating more effectively. However, despite a nuanced approach to both sides of the conversation taken throughout this thesis, and deep-rooted analysis of why we believe what we believe, I still think my grandparents are wrong. I think they are wrong not because their views of the world and religious beliefs are different from my own, but because these views and beliefs are harmful. Gadamer did not claim that motivated inquiry and prejudice were necessarily wrong; in fact, he presented these features as being unavoidable aspects of human experience. He warned against the Enlightenment-era prejudice against prejudice, claiming that the obsession with pure rationality “will itself prove to be a prejudice,” and will promote an inaccurate understanding of how we operate within the world.⁶⁷ Our own prejudices are ever-present, intricately woven within the fabric of historical context and previous experiences.

However, not all prejudices are *good*. We can acknowledge the presence of prejudice, the importance of the historical context these prejudices highlight, even the benefits we may derive from their examination, and still work to change them in the present. There are certain aspects of the world that need to be changed for the progress and prosperity of greater society, especially when those changes would benefit the historically marginalized voices who have never had a chance to enact those changes themselves. Traditions do not “persist because of the inertia of what once existed.”⁶⁸ Rather, they need to “be affirmed, embraced, cultivated.”⁶⁹ In Bergarian terms, they need to be socially maintained. Therefore, they can be changed. Those traditions and prejudices and belief structures which are especially precarious within the broader, socially constructed worlds of individuals are likely the ones which can be changed most easily. The ones which people cling to with such fervor that they create an entire socio-engineered plausibility

⁶⁷ Gadamer, “Hermeneutic Experience,” 320.

⁶⁸ Gadamer, “Hermeneutic Experience,” 324.

⁶⁹ Gadamer, “Hermeneutic Experience,” 324.

structure for themselves are likely the ones they subconsciously feel are most threatened by the outside world. Sometimes, the canopy has to burn, whether or not its residents are fully prepared.

The works of Mary Douglas shine light on the power imbalance that exists in the dynamic I have with my grandparents, one which likely exists in many conversations similar to my own experiences. Simply put, my grandparents have the power to change their beliefs. It may be extremely difficult, perhaps even terrifying, to do so, especially when they have relied on these beliefs to form their socially constructed world for the majority of their lives. However, it is *possible* for them to do. In contrast, it is *impossible* for me to change my lived experience, nor the lived experiences of those I care deeply about. I alone do not possess the power to alter American society to the point where religious institutions would not be capable of harming members of marginalized communities.

Douglas argues in her exploration of pollution and power that there are two kinds of power in society. Those who have authority in their social structure possess positive power, and use this to propagate, support, and defend that structure. Marginalized people possess negative power, and are viewed as dangerous and threatening to the social structure.⁷⁰ In the case of conversation with my grandparents, they possess authority in the social structure. Even though the SBC is declining in membership and the taken-for-granted social reality my grandparents once enjoyed is destabilizing, Southern Baptism is largely still a formidable force in contemporary American society. Therefore, members of these organizations still possess more power in the larger social structure of America than more marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community. In comparison with this, my power in conversation is basically nonexistent. While I possess power in the sense that the arguments I pose are a threat to their plausibility structures such that it is at least subconsciously recognized, thereby giving me the

⁷⁰ Douglas, "Secular Defilement," 126.

power to “contaminate” their thoughts, my power to enact true change to my social situation is minimal. In a world analyzed by Douglas, I would venture to say that the closest we can come to “the world as it is” is the one in which those who are morally harmed are powerless to stop it.

We cannot simply erase experience, and we must become aware of how the history we have inherited serves to shape us in the present. However, we can understand that two beliefs are “valid” in the sense that we understand how and why they form within us and others, and still be able to apply a value judgment to those beliefs. And my grandparents, whether they mean to or not, are part of a system that causes harm. Their religious beliefs validate and legitimate their oppressive ideals on various social issues, a fact that they may seek to refute but is nonetheless a part of my experience with them. My conversations with them center around attempting to broaden their perspective in a desperate plea to gain their acceptance and allow them to be more open-minded. This is the reason why I feel justified in my quest to change my grandparent’s mind. At a certain point, my theoretical understanding of why they act in this way is not enough. At a certain point, particularly where religious belief justifies and encourages active harm against marginalized communities, moral stances must be brought into play. My work here serves as a foundation for the former concern, but I would urge us all not to forget the contexts in which this work is being completed, which continuously exemplify the harm that Southern Baptism has wrought across marginalized communities.

Conclusion

So, what is to be gained from the quasi-auto-ethnographic analysis that encompasses this thesis? What is to be wrought from another research project that ends with “well, it’s complicated?” What is the point of analyzing the worlds of my grandparents only to conclude that nothing I can say will get through to them at this point?

I began this paper with an aim to explain why I had such struggles communicating with my grandparents, an aim which I have achieved. But even more so, I began this paper with the intent to heal my own emotional wounds that have been caused by these conversations. With the knowledge that we keep running into impenetrable walls because of the way our legitimations function in response to the way our worlds and social bases construct and maintain themselves, I feel a weight lifted off of my shoulders. I have realized that in order for people to break out of the polarized system, there has to be someone willing to pull them out, but they also have to be willing to grasp that hand that is reaching out toward them. My grandparents are not willing to take my hand, but I finally have the strength to be okay with this fact. I am certainly not done having difficult conversations with them, but I can engage with them in a healthier way now, and perhaps that will allow everyone involved in the situation to find a little peace. Even more so, I hope that the analysis provided by this thesis can help other people achieve peace as well.

In conclusion, Peter Berger’s sociological theories can help us greatly in understanding the problems we face while communicating with each other. These issues have no easy solutions. It may well be the case that fifty years from now, the same phenomenon of holding onto the plausibility structures of the past will also plague the younger generations of today. However, perhaps through a greater understanding of the perspective of others, we can help mend the gap that so many people experience during communication. Perhaps using a Bergarian framework

can help people learn to feel with each other, to place more value on having empathy and helping our loved ones heal than winning a debate. At the very least, understanding can help to heal emotional wounds on all sides of conversations.

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