

## SUMMARY of Peter Berger, *THE SACRED CANOPY*

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### **CHAPTER 1: Religion and World-Construction**

Berger begins his interpretation of religion by observing that very little in human life is determined by instinct. Because we humans have a relatively short gestation period in the womb (compared to other species), we don't have time to develop very elaborate instinctual equipment. We have very few instincts, and the ones we have are quite weak. So we have few specific responses to specific stimuli "patterned" into us. This means that in every situation we have a very large range of options for responding. We are constantly forced to choose how to interact with the world.

In Berger's terminology, we must choose how to "externalize" ourselves, which means how to relate to and shape the environment around us. (Berger claims that in this respect we are different from all other animal species. He may well be wrong about other animal species; other animals may be a lot like us. But that doesn't mean he is wrong about human life.) Every time we externalize ourselves we change the environment, which creates a new set of choices to be faced since the relationship between self and world is always changing, we are always "off balance."

What we want more than anything else, according to this sociological view, is to be in balance--to have a permanent stable order in our lives, so that we can predict both the environment and the responses to it that we and others around us will choose. Society's main project is to create this sense of stable predictable order and to make all of us believe in it, although in fact it is always a false illusion.

Society does this by "objectivating," which means teaching us (especially when we are children) to make the same choices over and over again as we externalize ourselves. More importantly, society wants us to believe that those choices aren't really choices. Society wants us to act as if they are necessary and inevitable; as if they are an objective reality beyond our ability to change. For example, in our society we teach little children that people don't eat with their hands, they use silverware, even though in many societies people do eat with their hands. But we want our children to believe that they must use silverware, as if that were an objective fact.

Society also wants us to believe that the particular roles we play in life (for example, child, student, worker, spouse, etc.) are not arbitrary; that they could not be done any differently than we do them now. The process of learning these roles is called

"socialization." In order for socialization to work effectively, we must also feel that our inner identity depends on playing those roles. In Berger's terms, we must "internalize" the supposedly objective realities that society imposes upon us. We must feel that our inner worth, our inner sense of "rightness," depends on conforming to society's way of doing things. For example, we must feel not only mistaken but guilty or sinful or "bad" if we eat with our hands.

To denote the sum total of all the patterns that a particular society objectivates and wants individuals to internalize, Berger uses the term NOMOS. The nomos is made up of the society's worldview (all its knowledge about how things are) and its ethos (all its values and ways of living). The nomos is the product of a long series of human choices, all of which could have been made differently. But the society, through its process of socialization, hopes to persuade individuals that its nomos is objectively true and therefore unchangeable. The society wants the nomos to be taken for granted as much as possible. Society is usually pretty successful at this. Since we come out of the womb with such weak instinctual patterns, we simply don't know what to do. So for a long time we depend on our parents and other elders to teach us how to respond to the stimuli of the world. We usually have to trust them and do things the way they do things.

But every individual remains aware (however unconsciously) of some degree of freedom to act independently and go against the nomos. Since individuals as well as their environments are always changing, the nomos is inherently unstable. Moreover individuals eventually encounter other people who have a somewhat different nomos, so the truth of any given nomos appears to be somewhat subjective. The objective reality and permanence of the nomos are especially called into question by unusual experiences—for example, dreams, moments of insanity, or encounters with death. Anything that threatens to undermine the nomos raises the possibility that we might end up without a nomos. Berger calls this condition of being without a nomos "anomy." Since anomy is always a lurking possibility, the society wants to strengthen its nomos as much as possible. This is where religion enters the picture.

Religion is based on the claim that the particular nomos of a given society is not merely one among many possible choices. Rather, religion claims, the nomos is rooted in the cosmos (the universe) itself, because the nomos is a mirror image of the nature or pattern of the cosmos. since the cosmos is eternal, the nomos is also eternal, according to this claim. Religion supports its claim by supplying symbols that give a detailed image of how the nomos is rooted in the cosmos. These symbols seem charged with a special "sacred" power. This power is supposed to be the power that undergirds cosmic reality. It threatens those who violate the nature of reality with doom, while rewarding those who go along with reality. "Reality" in this sense means the patterns of the nomos, which are a mirror image of the cosmos. The ultimate threat, however, is to lose the nomos altogether and be plunged into the chaos of anomy. Religious symbols seem so powerful because they express the most important value in life: the feeling that reality is a meaningful order, not a random chaos. So religion hopes to persuade its followers that the universe, and the individual's as well as the group's life in the universe, are all based on the same unified and orderly pattern.

## CHAPTER 2: Religion and World-Maintenance

Every nomos is inherently precarious and uncertain, which makes human life a rather frightening affair. So every society tries to reassure its members by maintaining its world in some permanent order. This turns out to be impossible. But it is possible to make people believe that their world is really very permanent. The best way to do this is to persuade everyone that the nomos as it exists today should be and must be just as it is—that no alternative can even be imagined. This is called "legitimizing" the nomos. All knowledge legitimates the nomos. Everything that passes for "objective knowledge" is actually an interpretation of reality. But if everyone believes it to be true, than no alternative interpretation will be considered, and the nomos will appear stable and legitimate. Once, for example, everyone "knew" that slavery was an inevitable and acceptable institution, or that children should be beaten. As long as these views were considered objectively true, the nomos based upon them seemed quite legitimate.

Before modern times, religion was the strongest force for legitimating the nomos. Religion performed this task in several ways. One way was to claim that human life (the microcosm) was a mirror image of the universe (the macrocosm). So, for example, some societies "knew" (i.e., believed) that their political structure mirrored the hierarchical relationships among the gods or the forces of nature. Another way to legitimate the nomos is to say that our thoughts and behavior are dictated by the will of God, or that they follow some impersonal cosmic force (the Great Spirit, the Tao, the Buddha-Nature, the Logos, etc.).

When these legitimations are working well, they are considered to be objectively true knowledge about the world. The same techniques also legitimate individual roles. So, for example, people might pay taxes to the government because they "know" that God has commanded them to pay taxes. Others may "know" that they are imitating what the gods do in the heavens. (Yes, in some myths gods pay taxes to the divine government, too.) Of course this helps to maintain the patterns of social behavior unchanged. But it also gives the individual a sense of cosmic importance. By paying taxes (just to continue this example) the individual believes that s/he has done something of eternal transcendent value, something god-like. Thus ordinary behaviors and experiences take on extraordinary meaning. (This is why parents say things like, "God loves children who brush their teeth.")

To reinforce this sense of extraordinary meaning, religions turn ordinary behaviors into rituals. Every nomos is precarious in part because people, having innate freedom, tend sometimes to "forget" how they are supposed to think and act. A ritual "reminds" the individual of the "true" way of life and its "true" meaning. Rituals reinforce the supposedly objective knowledge that legitimates the nomos. They create the sense that there is an unshakeable structure determining the patterns of everyday life. Most rituals are not made up by powerful leaders who impose them on the people (though this sometimes happens). Rather, most rituals arise from ordinary people with their ordinary

tendency to do the same things over and over, by habit. (Think of the rituals you and others have created for the beginning of each class, for example.) So the same process of repetition that creates the nomos in the first place also creates the rituals that legitimate the nomos.

Religion also has to give meaning to extraordinary experiences such as dreams, ecstasies, wars, encounters" with foreigners, etc. All of these may challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions about reality—what we "know" to be "objectively" true. They may suggest that the world is open to alternative interpretations. This raises the possibility of a change in the nomos, which can create a threat of chaos and anomy. What religion does in these cases is to deny that there is really anything here outside the order of the nomos. Religion does this by offering "knowledge" that "explains" the extraordinary event in terms of the ordinary order. So it insists that there is no threat to the order, because nothing outside of the known order really exists. For example, many Christian Americans negated Marxism's threat to the capitalist nomos by identifying Marxism with the devil and/or original sin. Since sin and the devil have a well known place within the Christian world order, there was nothing really new seen in Marxism, and it could not challenge the existing order of things.

After the cold war, the same process goes on with other potential threats: Saddam Hussein, drugs, gays & lesbians, etc. If they can be explained within the existing nomos, by being labeled as sinful or devilish, they can be combated without raising the threat of anomy. Every religion, and every kind of knowledge, has to be maintained by particular groups of people. If the knowledge is going to be accepted as true, the groups who maintain it have to be accepted as good and right. For example, you are likely to believe what you learn in a university classroom if you view the structure of the university, and the people who run it, as good and right. You are likely to believe the teachings of a religion if you view its clergy as good and right.

A group of people who maintain a body of knowledge, along with the institutions they have created, is called a "plausibility structure." The nomos will seem plausible as long as it is supported by a strong plausibility structure. Since society wants to maintain its nomos, it will try to exclude or destroy every alternative nomos. One important way to do this is to exclude or destroy every alternative plausibility structure. So, for example, the military may ban gay and lesbian organizations on its bases because it wants us all to "know" (i.e., believe) that gays and lesbians cannot be good soldiers. If the plausibility structure is weakened, it is more likely that some people may begin to question the nomos. This is one main reason that scandals involving ministers or priests are so threatening to Christian churches, for example. Logically, even if all the Christian clergy in the world were having sexual affairs, that should not tell us anything about the truth or falsity of Christian values. But emotionally most of us do judge a nomos by its plausibility structure, for they are the people who represent the nomos to the public.

When the plausibility structure is called into question, this can have two opposite effects. It can evoke a stricter insistence on traditional values. For example, the more we learned about the CIA and the military smuggling drugs, the more the government told us to "Just

Say No." Or a shaky plausibility structure can lead to reforms and changes in the nomos. For example, political scandals in the U.S. and other countries have led to new ways of choosing leaders (e.g., direct primaries and open conventions). Soon everyone "knows" that these new ways are the only rights and true ways. So changes in the plausibility structure evoke changes in the nomos. But the process also works the other way around: changes in the nomos can produce changes in the plausibility structure. For example, many women and men no longer believe in giving special privileges to men. Therefore more and more people are losing trust in an all-male clergy. In response, more and more denominations are allowing female clergy. They then legitimate this change in the plausibility structure by changing the nomos: they "discover" that "true" Christianity or Judaism does allow for female clergy. So there is a dialectical relation between nomos and plausibility structure: each affects the other.

### **CHAPTER 3: The Problem of Theodicy**

In order to legitimate the nomos, a society must deny that there is anything inherently disorderly or unpredictable in the world. Yet we know that the world is inherently disorderly because we must face our own dissolution and that of our loved ones, and the day of death is totally unpredictable. Death is the ultimate threat with which every society must deal, and most societies use religion to make it endurable. "The power of religion," Berger writes, "depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men [and women] as they stand before death, or, more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it." The ultimate problem raised by death and other forms of disorder is not the physical pain. We can endure all sorts of pain as long as it has meaning—as long as it makes sense to us. The unendurable pain comes from senseless, meaningless suffering: suffering which is inexplicable within the social order.

This is what we mean by "evil." So a crucial task for every nomos is to give an explanation for what seems to be evil. This kind of explanation Berger calls "theodicy." (Literally, the word means justifying the ways of God. But for Berger it means justifying the nomos, whether or not the nomos includes any explicit image of God.) To accept any explanation for suffering, disorder, and evil, one must accept the entire nomos. Theodicy always claims that there really is no disorder—that somehow everything makes sense in the big scheme of things. If a child dies, for example, people may say that God was calling it home, or testing the parents' faith, or perhaps it was the child's karma. In a theodicy, the nomos makes sense out of what threatens to appear senseless, as long as one accepts the claim that the nomos is orderly, all-embracing, and eternal. So the price the individual pays for such consolation is to subject himself or herself to a larger reality (the nomos), and to be swallowed up by that reality. This does not take away the pain. But it makes the pain feel endurable, right, or even noble. Indeed it may make the pain pleasurable.

Berger calls this a "masochistic" attitude, because it actually feels good (or at least better) to submit oneself to the larger reality (God, the cosmos, the Great Spirit, etc.) than to stand alone and have to face the pain without any meaningful explanation. The masochistic person says, in effect, "I am nothing. God—or the cosmic reality, or the

nomos--is everything." By saying this, the person feels reassured that the structure that has given meaning to life is permanent and unshakeable. This reassurance more than compensates for whatever suffering must be endured. The more we suffer, the more opportunity we have to reaffirm our trust in the nomos and in the cosmos. So religious people may actually seek out adversity in order to have more opportunities to legitimate their faith to others and to themselves. Similarly, patriotic citizens may accept or even seek out occasions to suffer and die for their country; i.e., for their nomos. In Berger's view, our primary motivation for everything we do is to maintain the illusion we share with others in our society—the illusion that our nomos is universal and eternal, that the way things are is the way they must be, and that the way we do things now is not simply the best, but the only way to do them. As long as we can maintain this illusion, we feel that life is meaningful. Therefore we will do the most extreme, and perhaps self-destructive, things in order to remain convinced of the truth of our nomos.

## **CHAPTER 5: The Process of Secularization**

If we want to understand how our modern secular society arose, Berger claims, we should study the development of Christianity. Secularization undermines the power of Christianity to govern society's main institutions and determine public values. Therefore Christianity was the source of the process that undermined its own power; Christianity dug its own grave. Berger may overstate the case here. Others would argue that non-Christian, or even anti-Christian, processes contributed a lot to secularization. still his chapter does help us understand how a special form of Christianity--the Protestantism of northwest Europe--played a major role in shaping our society. Before Judaism and Christianity arose, there were some basic values shared by all the pre-Biblical polytheistic religions:

1. Human beings, the gods, and nature were seen as connected in a single system. The connections consisted mainly of magical, supernatural forces.
2. People believed in many beings that were more than human, yet less than fully divine. These beings were intermediaries. They could be manipulated to bring human messages to the divine and divine power to humans.
3. Life was meaningful and successful as long as people could manipulate the supernatural forces and intermediary beings. This was done by magical rituals.
4. The whole society related as a single corporate entity to the magical forces. The individual's life gained meaning by participating in the society's life, not by innovating or being unique.
5. Time was conceived as more cyclical than linear. The goal of life was to keep things securely the same. There was no fundamental change desired, and no progress to be made.

The Old Testament protested against these features of previous religion and affirmed new values:

1. God is withdrawn from the world; nature is "disenchanted."
2. Meaning comes from controlling history--making a better future-- progress.
3. Words and rationality are the key to meaning and progress.
4. Progress comes from living by rational systematic codes, not magic rituals.
5. Each individual is responsible for choosing meaning and making progress.
6. Religion means relating to God through the individual mind and soul, with a minimum of other kinds of connections.

Medieval Christianity (especially Roman Catholicism), although it was based on some Old Testament values, also restored the values of pre-Biblical polytheism (1-5 in the first list above). For example, the dead saints and martyrs of the Church became intermediaries between people and God. Religion was largely a matter of manipulating these intermediaries for one's own salvation. (Berger may exaggerate here, but he does describe some powerful tendencies in medieval Christianity.)

The Protestant Reformation was a protest against many of these features of Roman Catholicism. Protestants claimed to "re-form" Christianity by returning to the "original" Christianity described in the Bible. Protestantism therefore urged each individual Christian to read and study the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Clergymen had no special privilege in God's sight, they said; all individuals were free and responsible to guide their own religious life.

To a significant degree, the Protestants' returned to the values of the Old Testament (highlighted in points 1-6 in the second list above). But the biblical values restored by Protestants are in many ways the sources of our secular values. Secular people try to use reason and words to understand nature. They "disenchant" nature in order to control it and make progress. They are equally concerned about understanding and controlling history in order to build a better future. In this effort they rely heavily on rational law codes and social systems. Secular people see each individual as responsible for contributing to the growth of reason and progress. They also see each individual responsible for his or her own religious life.

This last point was particularly important in Protestantism. It narrowed the number of possible connections between the individual and God. It took away the many intermediaries, leaving mainly the Word (i.e., the Bible) as interpreted by the individual's rational mind and conscience. This was too fragile a connection to last very long. When

rationality became the highest value, the connection snapped for many people. They no longer found religious meaning of any kind. Life became entirely secular.

Berger's analysis in Chapter 5 only deals explicitly with theological and religious ideas. But the Protestant Reformation was part of a larger process of social, political, and economic change that began in the 16th century in northwest Europe. Berger has this development in mind as he writes about the Reformation. The result of this larger change was a new bourgeois Protestant nomos that came to dominate Western Europe by the 18th century. It is especially important for us to understand because it is the same nomos brought to North America by the Europeans in our colonial era. This new nomos was the basis for the modern secular society. It assumed the basic Old Testament values and added some new developments of its own. They include:

1. The religious and secular spheres are coordinated, but divided; each has its own role to play in society's progress. Therefore a secular calling in life can be as worthy as a religious calling.
2. The success of secular life is measured largely by wealth.
3. Capitalism--the creation and investment of profit--was assumed to be the best way to generate more wealth.
4. Freedom now meant, above all, the freedom to work, make money, and invest the money one made. Maximum freedom--which means each individual working for their own best interests--is supposed to maximize everyone's wealth and welfare.
5. In order to amass wealth, the world must be predictable and controllable.
6. To increase prediction and control, individuals create rational legal and political systems, and bureaucracies to implement them.
7. People give their primary allegiance to the nation-state, which coordinates all wealth.

Once the slender link between humans and God began to snap, secular concerns began to be more important than religious concerns. The individual's new-found freedom and rationality was directed less toward God or spiritual matters, and more toward the "disenchanted" world. Progress became the highest value. Progress now meant an ever-increasing efficiency in predicting and controlling the world. This would increase the wealth of the nation and, supposedly, the wealth of all individuals within it, as long as capitalists were free to invest their money however they saw fit. More wealth meant a higher standard of living and therefore a better life for everyone. All the institutions of the nation would now be rationally coordinated, so that all could contribute to this secular goal. The main purpose of government was to oversee this rational coordination, to ensure that the whole system functioned as smoothly as possible. Therefore every individual not only could, but had to, take part in political life. Individualism, capitalism, and rationalization set the stage for the coming rise of democracy.