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PETER BERGER AND NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

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Introduction

In the early 1970s New Testament scholars began to rekindle an interest in the social dimensions of early Christianity.¹ Social questions were by no means new to the agenda for historical studies of early Christianity – they had been prominently addressed in diverse ways much earlier in the century, by scholars such as Adolf Deissmann, Shirley Jackson Case, Shailer Mathews, and Karl Kautsky – but for a variety of reasons they had come to be somewhat neglected. By the 1970s, it seemed to a number of scholars that New Testament studies, in its focus on the development of early Christian theology, had rather lost sight of the social realities in which those theological ideas were enmeshed. In Robin Scroggs's oft-quoted words: 'too often the discipline of the theology of the New Testament (the history of *ideas*) operates out of a methodological docetism, as if believers had minds and spirits unconnected with their individual and corporate bodies' (Scroggs, 1980, p. 165) The aim of those who sought to revive an interest in the social aspects of early Christianity was, again in Scroggs's words, 'to put body and soul together again' (p. 166). In 1973 a group was established under the auspices of the US-based Society of Biblical Literature to study the social world of early Christianity (see Smith 1975). In Germany, the 'sociological' approach to the New Testament was almost single-handedly brought to prominence by Gerd Theissen, who published a series of now classic articles between 1973 and 1975.²

As scholars sought to develop their understanding of the social dimensions of early Christianity it was natural that they should turn to the social sciences – themselves expanding

in the 1960s and 1970s – for resources to help them in their task. Indeed, in the succeeding decades New Testament scholars have drawn upon a wide variety of theories, models and methods, from sociology, anthropology, social psychology etc., in their attempts to illuminate the context and character of the earliest Christian movement. What have come to be known as ‘social-scientific’ approaches are now well-established and widely employed in the field of New Testament studies.³ And since 1972, when his co-authored theoretical treatise was (to my knowledge) first taken up by a New Testament scholar, Peter Berger’s work has remained among the most widely used theoretical resources – and for good reason, as we shall see below. In the following essay I shall first outline some examples of the ways in which Berger’s work has been employed in studies of the New Testament. These are, let me stress, only selected examples from what could be an extensive list. Then I shall reflect on both the significant gains and the critical questions that seem to me to remain.

The use of Berger’s work in New Testament studies

From the 1970s up to the present, two of Berger’s works have remained by far the most frequently drawn upon in New Testament studies: the classic theoretical treatise, *The Social Construction of Reality*, written with Thomas Luckmann and published in 1966, and *The Sacred Canopy*,⁴ published by Berger in 1967 and in which he applies the theoretical perspective from the co-authored work specifically to the subject of religion.

The first person to notice the significance of Berger’s work for understanding the community-forming role of the New Testament writings was Wayne Meeks, in an article published in 1972. Here Meeks sets out to investigate the enigmatic motif of Jesus’ descent and ascent in the Gospel of John. He maintains that the motif must be understood in terms of the social function which it performed: as a part of the Johannine ‘symbolic universe’ it served to make sense of the history and experiences of the community for which the

evangelist wrote, a community which had suffered the painful trauma of separation and isolation from the synagogue. Drawing on Berger and Luckmann's work, Meeks suggests that the depiction of Jesus in the fourth gospel serves both to create and to reflect the symbolic universe of a sectarian community which has rejected 'the world' and, in a sense, constructed a new one: 'Faith in Jesus, in the Fourth Gospel, means a removal from "the world," because it means transfer to a community which has totalistic and exclusive claims ... If one "believes" what is said in this book, he is quite literally taken out of the ordinary world of social reality' (Meeks, 1972, pp. 70-71). Meeks therefore concludes that:

One of the primary functions of the book [sc. John's Gospel], therefore, must have been to provide a reinforcement for the community's social identity, which appears to have been largely negative. It provided a symbolic universe which gave religious legitimacy, a theodicy, to the group's actual isolation from the larger society (p. 70)

Another pioneering work applying social-scientific perspectives to early Christianity was John Gager's 1975 study *Kingdom and Community*. Gager used a wide range of social-scientific studies – on millenarian movements, cognitive dissonance, the routinization of charisma etc. – to illuminate various aspects of 'the social world of early Christianity' (the subtitle of the book). One of Gager's basic theoretical foundations is taken from Berger's work, namely the view of religion as 'the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established' (Gager, 1975, p. 9, quoting Berger 1967). Clearly indebted to Berger, Gager further describes religion as 'that particular mode of world-building that seeks to ground its world in a sacred order, a realm that justifies and explains the arena of human existence in terms of the eternal nature of things' (p. 10). As a new religion, Gager sees early Christianity primarily as a project of 'world-construction', with 'world-maintenance' emerging as a task once such a movement survives the 'traumatic period of its birth' (p. 10). In a somewhat

similar vein, Howard Kee (1980) also acknowledges the stimulus of Berger's work in his approach to early Christianity as a constructed 'sacred cosmos', though he takes his direction more substantially from Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann's work on *Structures of the Life World* (see Kee, 1980, pp. 23-6, 30-53).

A rather different appropriation of Berger's ideas is found in Theissen's 1983 essay on 'Christology and Social Experience' (Eng. trans. Theissen, 1993, pp. 187-201). Taking up Berger's notion of 'plausibility structures' (see Berger, 1969, pp. 50-54), an idea less frequently appropriated by New Testament scholars, Theissen explores how various aspects of Paul's Christology are rendered plausible by social realities of the context in which they were expressed. He examines what he calls 'position Christology', which 'interprets the Christ-event on the analogy of a radical change in social position', and 'participation Christology', which 'works with physiomorphic (or physioform) metaphors', primarily 'the image of the body' (Theissen, 1993, p. 189). According to Theissen, the (limited) opportunities for social mobility in the Roman empire, e.g. through the manumission of slaves, provide a plausibility basis for early Christian talk of changed position and status for believers. For example, the one who is a slave is called a 'freedperson of Christ' (1 Cor 7.22). Correspondingly, Paul's ideas about believers together forming 'the body of Christ' (Rom 12.5; 1 Cor 12.27) are meaningful because of the widespread use of the metaphor of the body to describe society.

Berger and Luckmann's theoretical treatise provides one of the major theoretical resources for Philip Esler's (1987) exploration of the social and political motivations of the theology of Luke-Acts. Esler focuses particularly on the concept of legitimation, specifically the legitimating function of the symbolic universe. One clear example of this form of legitimation, Esler suggests, is the way in which the author of Luke-Acts (known simply as Luke) 'takes great pains to present Christianity as a faith with a past ... Luke creates a

symbolic universe which orders history in such a way as to provide a past, present and future for his Christian contemporaries' (p. 19).⁵ Linking these ideas with social-scientific studies of sectarianism, Esler interprets Luke-Acts as an attempt – written for the members of the 'sect' itself – to legitimate the existence of what had originally been a Jewish reform movement but had recently 'acquired a sectarian status in relation to Judaism' (p. 65).⁶ Esler then interprets various themes in Luke-Acts in terms of their legitimating function. For example, Luke's portrayal of open table-fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians is intended to legitimate this (controversial) practice in the churches of Luke's day: Luke re-writes history so as to summon Peter and James, as well as Paul, in support of this custom (see pp. 71-109; Acts 10.1–11.18; 15.6-29). Another example is Luke's positive portrayal of Rome, for which Esler offers the explanation:

that among the members of Luke's community were a number of Romans serving the empire in a military or administrative capacity, and that part of Luke's task was to present Christian history in such a way as to demonstrate that faith in Jesus Christ and allegiance to Rome were not mutually inconsistent (p. 210).

Some of the theoretical resources central to Esler's approach were taken up by Margaret MacDonald (1988) in her study of the process of institutionalization in the Pauline churches. Once again Berger and Luckmann's work (and Berger's 1967 monograph) is, in MacDonald's own words, 'of primary significance' (p. 10). Along with Berger and Luckmann's theory, MacDonald employs Weber's notion of the routinization of charisma and a Troeltschian church-sect typology. She considers the Pauline letters of the New Testament as attempts to construct, maintain and protect a symbolic universe which shapes and orders the belief and practice of the Pauline communities. Along with a majority of scholars, MacDonald regards a number of the epistles attributed to Paul as pseudonymous compositions written some time

after Paul's death. Hence she is able to use the Pauline epistles as evidence for a process of institutionalization over a period of time spanning somewhere between 50 and 90 years. MacDonald treats the genuine letters of Paul as reflecting a stage of 'community-building institutionalization'. At this stage in the Pauline movement, 'the [symbolic] universe is in the process of solidifying ... much ambiguity surrounds the question of how members of the community should act and how beliefs should be interpreted. Institutionalization is relatively free to proceed in different directions' (p. 84). With Colossians and Ephesians, written by close associates of Paul around, or shortly after, the time of Paul's death (p. 3) we witness a phase of what MacDonald calls 'community-stabilizing institutionalization'. Here, while the original symbolic universe was transformed, it also gained 'new objectivity as it passed into the hands of a new generation ... Institutionalization had been set on a more definite course' (p. 157). Finally, the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus), written in the early second century (p. 4), represent a stage of 'community-protecting institutionalization'. Heresy and deviance have become pressing problems and the writer's energies are devoted to protecting the church from what are perceived as destructive forces. Stress is placed on the authority of leaders and the need for sound teaching and right conduct: 'In the Pastoral Epistles, the tools of the creative theologian are pushed aside and all attention turns to preservation and protection of existing beliefs' (p. 234). During this period, then, MacDonald concludes, the Pauline churches have moved from their sectarian beginnings towards something closer to Troeltsch's 'church'-type institution, and their originally charismatic form of leadership has been routinized and institutionalized. In short, her study traces 'the transformation of the early church from its loosely-organized, charismatic beginnings to its more tightly-structured nature in the second century' (p. 235).

In very recent monographs too a number of authors have appropriated Berger's work in the formulation of their own approach. For example, Raymond Pickett (1997) draws on *The*

Social Construction of Reality in his examination of the ways in which Paul's presentation of Jesus' death on the cross in his Corinthian letters serves to construct and shape the social praxis of the early Christian congregations at Corinth. Pickett explains that his concern is to move beyond social and historical description to an analysis of the 'social impact' that 'a text, or symbol within the text, was designed to have in the realm of social interaction' (Pickett, 1997, pp. 34-5). Here theological symbols and ideas are examined as part of a symbolic universe which shapes and orders human relationships.

Berger's notion of world-construction is important in Edward Adams' (2000) investigation into Paul's use of the terms 'world' (*kosmos*) and 'creation' (*ktisis*) to construct a particular view of the world for his converts and thus shape their interaction with it. However, Adams also raises certain criticisms of Berger and prefers to draw more detailed theoretical resources from the field of critical linguistics (see pp. 23-25).

Significant gains

There are, then, a considerable number of recent studies of the New Testament which have employed Berger's work as a fruitful and important resource for developing new and distinctive understandings of the earliest Christian texts and communities. As Adams has recently stated: 'Berger's notion of the symbolic universe is now firmly established as a standard heuristic tool in New Testament studies, being widely employed by interpreters' (Adams, 2000, p. 6). What is it about Berger's work that has encouraged such wide and diverse use, and what have been the gains from this interdisciplinary fertilization?

Firstly, Berger offers a way of approaching the New Testament – or any other religious phenomena, for that matter – sociologically, but without reducing the significance of the religious content to mere epiphenomena, products of social or material determinants. New Testament scholars have rightly been wary of forms of 'reductionism',⁷ such as are found in

some versions of historical materialism (though not in Marx himself),⁸ where religious or spiritual ideas are seen merely as the reflection of specific configurations of socio-economic relationships. Berger and Luckmann, by contrast, while regarding all ‘knowledge’, including religious traditions, as a human product (a stance which naturally also raises theological questions),⁹ take the constructed cosmos of meaning with great seriousness as a (perhaps *the*) central human achievement in the making of society. Without such a cognitive construction there would be only chaos and anomie: ‘*All* societies are constructions in the face of chaos’ (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 121). The universe of meaning, humanly produced, is never explained away or reduced to a socio-economic basis, even though it is acknowledged to be enmeshed in and influenced by its material context. Berger maintains that human beings *need* ‘meaning’, just as they have essential material needs.¹⁰

Secondly, with the notion of religion as a ‘sacred canopy’, a symbolic universe, Berger offers a way of bringing together theological and sociological concerns. The ‘content’ of the symbolic universe is precisely that ‘body of theoretical tradition’ which theologians are concerned to elucidate and to develop. But by viewing this body of tradition *as* a symbolic universe, within the theoretical framework set out in *The Social Construction of Reality*, our attention is drawn to the fact that such a body of ‘ideas’, or ‘knowledge’, shapes and orders human life. It not only creates a framework of meaning and significance, but also determines the boundaries of right and wrong, structures human relationships and actions. From the perspective of Berger and Luckmann’s sociology of knowledge, there is an inextricable connection between theological ideas and social practice. It is not surprising, then, that this theoretical framework was seized upon by those concerned precisely to ‘put body and soul together again’ in their studies of earliest Christianity.

One further consequence of this theoretical perspective is to blur the boundaries between, and to broaden the scope of investigations into, aspects of New Testament ‘theology’ and

‘ethics’. Under a traditional model it is easy to identify the specifically ‘theological’ and ‘ethical’ sections of, say, a Pauline letter like Romans or Galatians: after an extended theological argument Paul gives specific exhortations about Christian conduct. And studies of ethics may be clearly distinguished from studies of theological or doctrinal topics such as Christology, or eschatology. But once the whole body of theological tradition in the New Testament is viewed as a community-shaping symbolic universe any such distinction between ethical and theological portions of the documents becomes somewhat (though not entirely) artificial. For even thoroughly ‘theological’ ideas about God, Christ, the Spirit, convictions concerning righteousness and salvation, and so on, all serve to structure the identity and interaction of the Christian community. The whole symbolic universe gives meaning and shape to human life. Hence authors like Pickett (1997), briefly mentioned above, using this perspective, examine how particular theological symbols or ideas shape the social praxis of the early Christian communities.

Berger’s work has also provided a stimulus to study the ways in which theological ideas legitimate particular social practices and patterns of social interaction (as in Esler’s 1987 work: see above). Once again this brings the study of theology down to earth, so to speak: one is led not only to investigate the structure, logic or history of some specific idea, but also to ask about what pattern of conduct and relationships, what position of authority, whose interests, it serves to legitimate. Such questions are fundamental to any attempt to investigate theology *critically*, since they help to focus attention on its *social impact* or implications, and, moreover, on the crucial issues of power and ideology: who says what to whom, and in whose interests?¹¹

In short, for those who seek to develop a social-scientific perspective on the New Testament, Berger’s work provides some basic *desiderata* which are, it seems to me, likely to remain of central importance. The conception of a symbolic universe which shapes the lives

of those who inhabit it provides a theoretical framework which takes the theology of the New Testament seriously but which opens up sociological questions about how this universe orders and legitimates certain patterns of social life and interaction. From this point of view early Christianity is indeed a project of world-construction — not *ex nihilo*, to be sure, but with long-established traditions from its religious and cultural parent, Judaism; yet certainly a new and distinctive creation, which shaped and ordered human lives in a distinctive manner.

Critical questions

However, along with the important gains that Berger's work has brought to New Testament studies there are also critical issues to be considered. I am not primarily concerned here with the 'theological' issues, to which Berger himself has previously responded (see note 9), raised by the view of New Testament theology as a human construction;¹² rather it is the issues relating to the practice of social-scientific, or socio-historical, method that I intend to explore.¹³

My first question concerns the use of the notion of legitimation. While I am entirely persuaded that this is an important concept with which to explore questions about the social purpose or impact of theological texts, it seems to me that it can be used to present such texts as forms of post-practice reflection, rather than as ideas which may have played a causal role in establishing certain forms of practice in the first place. Indeed, this sequence of practice followed by legitimation derives from Berger and Luckmann's analysis, where a form of social interaction subsequently has to be justified or explained to a third party, or a new generation, and hence gives rise to forms of legitimation (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966, pp. 110-22; Berger, 1967, pp. 29-36). So, for example, Esler sees Luke as engaged in an attempt to legitimate the practice of mixed table-fellowship (see above). Francis Watson (1986) regards much of Paul's 'theology' as serving a 'social function': to legitimate the sectarian

separation of the Pauline law-free congregations from the Jewish synagogues. For Watson, Paul's decision to turn to the Gentiles in mission and to preach a gospel free from the demands of the Jewish law (circumcision etc.) came about for merely pragmatic reasons; his theology is a legitimating ideology which is intended to undergird the state of separation between Pauline sect and 'parent' Judaism. In this essentially functionalist analysis (Paul's theology serves a social function) it seems that the view of Paul's theology as legitimation obscures any appreciation of the possibility that theological convictions may have played a key role in initiating and establishing the forms of social practice that remained controversial and thus subsequently needed to be (further) legitimated. For example, the baptismal tradition that 'there is no longer Jew or Gentile... you are all one in Christ' (Gal 3.28; cf. 1 Cor 12.13; Col 3.11) seems highly likely to have played a part in establishing the practice of mixed table-fellowship at Antioch and elsewhere, although clearly the practice proved controversial and thus led to further arguments and attempts to legitimate it (see Gal 2.11-21). I am not, let me stress, meaning to imply that the concept of legitimation is not of considerable importance, but there is a danger that its use as an interpretative tool can lead to texts being interpreted primarily as attempts to legitimate already existing forms of social practice. The social practices themselves are thus left initially unexplained, emerging for merely accidental or pragmatic reasons.¹⁴ Here one sees the need for what Berger himself has emphasised as characteristic of social life, namely an appreciation of its dialectical and diachronic character, in which, over time, ideas and social practices interrelate, with ideas serving both to initiate, shape and legitimate various forms of social life, which are themselves always enmeshed in an ongoing and ever-changing process.

My second concern arises from the *way* in which Berger and Luckmann present the objectivity of the social order in their attempt to grasp the ongoing dialectic of externalisation, objectification and internalisation. While they seek to do justice to the fact that the social

order is only ever a human construction, and one which is continually in the process of production, so to speak, their theory *presents* the social order as something which attains a form of objectivity and which can be threatened, protected, etc.¹⁵ This focus on the objectivity which the social world attains can lead to a neglect of the extent to which this world is continually being reproduced and hence transformed, in and through human action, and may lead also to a portrayal of *change as threat* (cf. Berger, 1967, pp. 29-32). Despite their aims, then, I question whether Berger and Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality grasps adequately the relationships between action and structure, reproduction and transformation.¹⁶ This theoretical perspective can itself serve as an ideological legitimization of the *status quo*: firstly because it presents as a solidified 'object' what is in fact a fluid, contested, and continually reproduced set of customs and conventions, and secondly because it portrays 'challenges' to the dominant social order as threats which may unleash the dreaded forces of chaos and anomie.¹⁷ As I suggested in 1996:

The fact that a social order may be experienced as 'coercive power' by many is not necessarily to be explained by the notion that it is 'externalised' and 'objectified' but rather by the fact that certain groups have power and others do not. Berger and Luckmann present as a feature of the construction of social reality what is in fact a feature of the unequal distribution of power ... The labelling of some forms [of the symbolic order] as 'deviant' may be a strategy of dominant social groups to portray themselves as defenders of the social order while stigmatising and externalising others (Horrell, 1996, pp. 42-3).

What is implicit in the above quotation is my third concern, expressed in Anthony Giddens's terse comment that Berger and Luckmann's approach 'completely lacks a conception of the critique of ideology' (Giddens, 1979, p. 267 n. 8). What I understand by this is that there is no systematic attempt to explore 'the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination', to use John Thompson's definition of ideology (Thompson, 1984,

pp. 4, 130-31, etc.). To what extent does a particular symbolic universe sustain the interests of particular social groups or classes? How are specific relations of domination concealed as ‘natural’ and inevitable in a specific symbolic order? And how might the *presentation* of alternatives as threats to the very fabric of human society serve to legitimate ideologically the maintenance of a conventional pattern of social relations? In short, while Berger and Luckmann focus on the construction of the social order and its maintenance in the face of threats as a *sine qua non* for human society, there are also *critical* questions to be asked about the ideological dimensions of this process: about the distribution and exercise of power, the legitimation of sectional interests, and the strategies used to marginalise critique and alternatives in any specific form of the social order.

These critical concerns may be illustrated with reference to the New Testament.¹⁸ In her study outlined briefly above, MacDonald (1988) uses Berger and Luckmann’s work to provide the fundamental theoretical framework for her investigation into the process of institutionalization in the Pauline churches. According to MacDonald, the Pastoral Epistles represent a stage of ‘community-protecting institutionalization’, where the author is concerned to protect the community and its symbolic universe from the threat presented by heretical or deviant forms of teaching. Here Berger and Luckmann’s theoretical perspective converges closely with the perspective presented by the author of the Pastorals. Firstly, just as Berger and Luckmann present the symbolic universe as an objectified body of tradition, so too the Pastorals’ author presents his own teaching as a faithful presentation of Pauline doctrine (cf. 2 Tim 1.13-14; also 1 Tim 1.1-20, etc.). What this author therefore conceals is the extent to which his instruction is actually a transformed form of Pauline teaching, just as Berger and Luckmann’s notion of objectification can conceal the extent to which the social order is continually being reproduced and transformed. Secondly, just as Berger and Luckmann present challenges to the dominant social order as threats which may induce chaos

and anomie, so the Pastorals' author presents his opponents as nothing but 'despicable deviants'¹⁹ whose teaching threatens to undermine the very existence of the churches (see e.g. 1 Tim 4.1-3; 2 Tim 3.1-9; Titus 1.10-16). Using a theoretical perspective derived from Berger and Luckmann's work seems therefore to lead to confirming the ideology of this conservative author, rather than penetrating it critically. Questions should be asked about the ways in which both the 'opponents' *and* the author of the Pastorals are promoting particular forms of the Pauline tradition and about the power-struggle which this reflects; about the ways in which the Pastorals' author uses his form of Christian teaching in the service of particular social interests, to keep subordinate social groups – primarily women and slaves – firmly in their place (see 1 Tim 2.11-15; 6.1-2; Titus 2.1-10); and about the attempt to marginalise alternative viewpoints by *labelling* them as heretical and threatening. Somewhat ironically – since she expresses some sympathy with those whose voices were marginalised and silenced (MacDonald, 1988, p. 238) – MacDonald's theoretical framework does not give conceptual space to such questions. This illustrates for me why the important theoretical resources provided by Berger and Luckmann's theory need to be woven into the framework of a more critical social theory, in order to facilitate a critical sociological analysis of the early Christian movement.

Conclusion

Berger's theoretical work – and especially his co-authored treatise with Luckmann – has been widely influential in recent social-scientific study of the New Testament. There are, I have suggested, good reasons for this influence, for Berger's conceptual framework has provided a valuable way of appreciating the New Testament texts as theology, but as theology which – produced by human beings – constructs a meaningful human world and shapes the human conduct which takes place within that 'world'. The gains from this reconceptualisation will be

lasting. However, I have also raised some critical concerns about the shortcomings of this theoretical framework which illustrate why I think that its valuable insights need to be incorporated into a critical theory which gives more space to issues of power, interests and ideology. Of course, the broader challenge to New Testament specialists seeking to develop a sociological understanding of early Christianity is to avoid any simple adoption of this or that model or theory, popped into their shopping trolley during a brief dash through the social-scientific supermarket, and instead to adapt and refine their theoretical resources so that they are appropriate for the task of investigating the ancient texts that form their primary object of study. It should not be surprising if *The Social Construction of Reality* and *The Sacred Canopy*, published over three decades ago,²⁰ and written by sociologists whose primary field of empirical study is the contemporary world, need careful and critical appropriation in order to contribute to contemporary studies of the New Testament and its world. But the fact that these works have inspired – and continue to inspire – such a range of scholarly studies of the New Testament is ample tribute to the creativity and scholarly acumen of Peter Berger. In my particular field of study, though in some ways far removed from that of Berger's own, his considerable influence will be continue to be felt for some time to come.

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Notes

¹ For a more detailed overview of the developments sketched here, and a summary of current debates in the field and prospects for future development, see Horrell, 1999a.

² These essays were collected together and published in Theissen 1979. English translations are available in Theissen 1982 and 1993.

³ A representative collection of the range of work produced between 1973 and 1997 may be found in Horrell 1999b.

⁴ Published in the UK under the title *The Social Reality of Religion*.

⁵ Cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 120: ‘The symbolic universe also orders history. It locates all collective events in a cohesive unity that includes past, present and future.’

⁶ This model, drawn from Esler’s work and without explicit reference to Berger and Luckmann, is applied to Paul’s letters by Watson (1986).

⁷ This issue has often been discussed when considering the merits and dangers of using the social sciences in biblical exegesis. See e.g. Holmberg, 1990, pp. 149-50; Malina, 1982, pp. 237-8.

⁸ Cf. the comments of Berger and Luckmann, 1966, pp. 17-18; Giddens, 1971, pp. 205-23.

⁹ Questions to which Berger himself has responded: see Berger 1967, pp. 179-88; 1969. For discussion of the theological implications of Berger’s work, see also Cairns, 1974; Gill, 1974; 1975, pp. 29-34; 1977, pp. 16-22.

¹⁰ See e.g. Berger 1974; also Wuthnow, 1986, pp. 126, 136, etc.

¹¹ According to Berger, one of the basic questions from the sociological perspective is ‘Says who?’ (1963, p. 80). The discipline has a fundamentally ‘unmasking tendency’ (p. 51) in questioning that which is conventionally taken-for-granted. In the study of religion, where

people claim to speak of the divine will, and so on, ‘unmasking’ this claim to power by asking, ‘Says who?’ seems to me of particular importance.

¹² But for a recent attempt to place *theological* interpretation at the heart of New Testament studies, see the work of Francis Watson (e.g. Watson, 1994).

¹³ For further detail on the following ideas see Horrell, 1993; 1996, pp. 39-45. Philip Esler has responded to my critique of Berger and Luckmann in Esler, 1998; for my response, see Horrell, 2000.

¹⁴ Berger himself has seen the same problem, stating that legitimation ‘is one of the few terms in *The Social Construction of Reality* (and, consequently, in *The Sacred Canopy*) that I would prefer to reword today ... “Legitimation” suggests that the social structure legitimated is indeed prior, logically as well as chronologically, to whatever the legitimating ideas are. This is generally distortive, and particularly so in the case of religion’ (Berger, 1986, pp. 229-30).

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1966, pp. 76-7; Berger and Pullberg, 1966, p. 63; Berger, 1967, pp. 11, 24-5.

¹⁶ Hence I have preferred in my own work to adopt a framework which, while indebted to Berger and Luckmann, takes its orientation from Anthony Giddens’s structuration theory (see Horrell, 1996). On the similarities and differences between these and other attempts to resolve the fundamental theoretical issue of the relationship between human action and social structure, see Bhaskar, 1979, pp. 39-47; Gregory, 1981, pp. 10-11.

¹⁷ It is notable that Berger has become more clear and explicit about what I think it would be fair to call his conservative proclivities (cf. e.g. 1986, pp. 223, 225-6; 1991). My reading and critique of *The Social Construction of Reality* may therefore perhaps be nearer the mark than those who see in it a radical analysis of society. Berger writes: ‘When *The Social Construction of Reality* and other early writings of mine were taken as a warrant for the

various utopian eruptions of the late 1960s and early 1970s, this was due to a profound misunderstanding ... I may have “moved to the right” on specific political issues, but it is they who misread radicalism into these early writings. It was never there, either objectively or in intention’ (1986, p. 223).

¹⁸ For a more detailed presentation of the critique outlined here, see Horrell, 1993.

¹⁹ To use the felicitous phrase of Lloyd Pietersen, 1997.

²⁰ Though Berger’s view, at least in 1986, was that: ‘Of all the books I wrote or coauthored during the earlier part of my career, this [*The Social Construction of Reality*] is the one that I would change least if I were to revise it today’ (1986, p. 222).