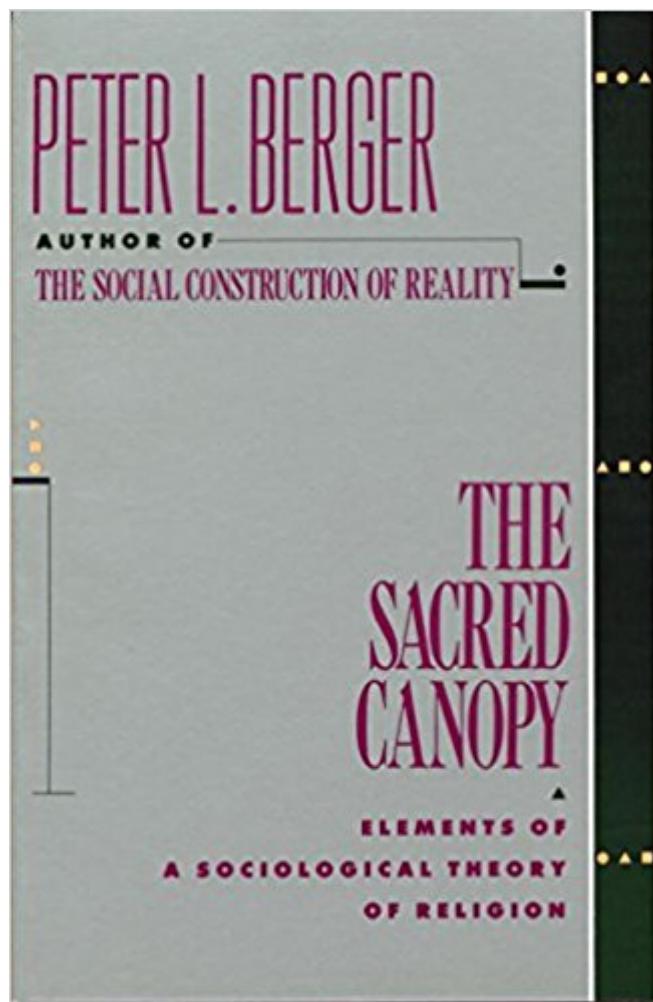


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The Sacred Canopy: Elements Of A Sociological Theory Of Religion



Synopsis

This important contribution to the sociology of religion provides an analysis that clarifies the often ironic interaction between religion and society. Peter Berger is noted for his concise and lucid style.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ha ha. Good old Peter Berger and his sacred canopy. Years ago, when I took comparative religion classes, this book was required reading already at the very first course, which included students fresh out of senior high. Don't worry. None of us understood it either. The poor professor (a competent Indologist, by the way) had to spend an entire lecture explaining Berger's opus. But no, the book isn't incomprehensible. Not really. However, unless you are pretty grounded in Hegel, Weber, Durkheim, Luckmann or Marx (not necessarily in that order), you might find this a hard read. When I re-read parts of the book this week, I thought it was easier than average scholarly literature. But then, that's me. I also noticed Berger's uncanny humour, which I didn't ten years ago. As when the author writes: "My communication with denizens of the realm of theology has, much to my regret, shrunk in recent years. But I would like to mention James Gustafson and Siegfried von Kortzfleisch as two theologians in whom I have always found an unusual openness to sociological thinking for which I have been grateful on more than one occasion". Siegfried...who?:D The book itself is difficult to summarize, but here goes. (SECTION ONE) The first part is a theoretical exposition of Berger's sociological theory of religion. Berger believes that humans are biologically fated to "exteriorize" and fill their world with meaning, i.e. create a culture, which is then "interiorized" by a process of socialization. Often, this leads to "alienation", since humans start to regard products of

their own activity as natural, unchanging and eternal objects "out there". Humans suffer the constant dread of anomie, a terror of meaninglessness.

This book is an extension of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's earlier book, "The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge" written in 1966, in which the authors begin with basic sociological assumptions about mental representations and how human beings come to know the world and form impressions of it. "The Sacred Canopy," while heavily informed by the ideas in "The Social Construction of Reality," was written only by Berger himself. The book is a thoroughly Marxist critique of religion with a dash of Freud thrown in for good measure. The Marxism comes from Berger's understanding of human consciousness. He emphasizes the dialectical nature of individual man and his relationship to culture and society. According to him, we can only "world-build" (or "cosmize," to use his argot) through a process of constant internalization and externalization of distinct mental representations. Berger defines religion as a sacred form of world-building, an "audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as humanly significant" (p. 28). (Forget temporarily, as I had to, that to call religion a "sacred" form of world-building seems to very much beg the question.) He argues religion to be the oldest, most powerful legitimizing order which plays a central role in construing order and rationality in our lives, and therefore in maintaining reality because they are the only things that can provide sacred legitimization for this socially constructed reality. Thus religion makes permanent the temporary, transcendentalizes the immanent, sacralizes the profane, and ensures a nomological (that is, rational and law-based) rather than chaotic reality.

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