

---

Roundtable on Global Reflections on the Fiftieth Anniversary  
of *The Sacred Canopy*

# *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*

Wendy Cadge\*

---

I read Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* in the winter of 1996 while studying abroad at the Divinity School at Edinburgh University. I vividly remember several dark afternoons and evenings in a student dormitory frantically underlining almost the whole book while regularly pushing the button on my space heater to stay warm. The first half of the book captivated me. The second half about secularization puzzled me and made me angry—I thought Berger was wrong, while the instructor who taught the course for which I was reading the book thought he was right. This volume, and the passionately argued paper I wrote that semester about how the secularization thesis could not be simplistically applied to the American case, drew me to the sociology of religion—a field and discipline I had never heard of when I started college.

Many of the authors in this symposium have their own versions of my story—of being captivated by *The Sacred Canopy*, inspired by it, and watching how it shaped their work and that of their colleagues. While the arguments about secularization in the volume have been well-debated, we mark its fiftieth anniversary in this symposium by asking what influence it has had—as a whole—on studies of sociology and religion around the world.

---

\*Wendy Cadge, Department of Sociology, Brandeis University, 415 South Street, Waltham, MA 02454, USA. E-mail: [wcadge@brandeis.edu](mailto:wcadge@brandeis.edu).

I am grateful to Derron Wallace who helped to conceptualize this symposium.

*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, December 2017, Vol. 85, No. 4, pp. 1116–1117  
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfx076

Advance Access publication on December 21, 2017

© The Author(s) 2017. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Academy of Religion. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: [journals.permissions@oup.com](mailto:journals.permissions@oup.com).

We are pleased to share four articles here and hope they will generate continued discussion and debate in diverse scholarly communities. We open with an article by American scholars Philip Gorski and Jeffrey Guhin that summarizes many of the key arguments in the book while offering four readings of it: neoclassical synthesis, theoretical prologue, secularization theory, and definition of religion. It is followed by three papers in which scholars from China, Latin America, and South Africa reflect on how the volume aged in their various contexts. Shining Gao translated the book into Chinese in 1991 and traces changing responses to it in the decades since in China. Eloisa Martín explores the book's reception in Latin America, while Asonzeh Ukah and Tammy Wilks consider its impact on African graduate students and scholarship about African religions globally.

Always eager for intellectual encounters, we approached Peter Berger about this symposium as we began to conceptualize it. I visited with him several times in his home office in Brookline where he told me, among other things, that he would not change the first half of the book except to get rid of the "ponderous language." The second half, on secularization, he said was an empirical mistake that his later theory of pluralism addresses directly (*The Many Altars of Modernity*, Walter de Gruyter, 2014). He spoke broadly about his approach to definitions of religion compared to that of Thomas Luckmann, what it means to call sociology a value-free science, who we might invite to write for this symposium, and how my young daughter Risa was (of whom he grew quite fond). He agreed to write a response to these papers, saying in an email in March 2017, "If you get the papers to me in late April or early May, I'll peruse them with great interest and compose a truly brilliant response."

Sadly, Peter died in July before he was able to read these papers. I sent them to him just before he got sick and he asked me to be in touch in a month: if the papers were there while he was not able to work on them, he said they would "just sit there and glare at me." Peter's death is a great loss to us, his scholarly community, as well as to his family. He remains one of the great sociologists, who almost always had a joke to tell and a twinkle in his eye. "I'm getting older," he wrote to me in the midst of our conversations about this symposium, "Last year was full of fiftieth anniversary celebrations for *The Social Construction of Reality!* The most solemn one was in my home-town, at the University of Vienna—where I was introduced as 'the most famous living sociologist of religion'—I suppose, not as illustrious as the most famous *dead* one—so Max Weber and Emile Durkheim still sit on their pedestals!"

Now, we imagine, Peter Berger is sitting on a pedestal beside them.