

My Instructor and Role Model Peter L. Berger †

There have been numerous obituaries around the world for my role model and sociologist of religion instructor, Peter L. Berger (March 17, 1929-June 27, 2017) [e.g., [here](#)].

For a long time I have had Berger on my blog under photos in the category “[Role Models](#)” with the subtitle: “Two sociologists of religion in conversation in Istanbul, April 2009: ‘Perhaps the most important representative of my field, Prof. Peter Berger, Boston.’”

Berger had been Professor of Sociology and Theology at Boston University since 1981, and from 1985 to 2010 he was Director of the *Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs CURA* (as it is now called). CURA is housed in a beautiful half-timbered house atypical of US universities (see photo).

He wrote grippingly, humorously and always with concrete examples. In addition, he had inexhaustible expertise. However, he also had enormous general knowledge. His texts were also widely understandable outside the field and thus introduced many of today’s sociologists and sociologists of religion to these subjects in the first place. The Viennese pastoral theologian and sociologist of religion [Paul M. Zulehner](#) wrote the following in his obituary, which I consider the best of all:

“Reading Peter Berger’s books was always a pleasure - whether it was his *Invitation to Sociology*, 1963, or *A Rumor of Angels*, 1970. He never wrote in such a way that the meaning of one of his texts could only be sensed through a second reading. Another of my great teachers, Karl Rahner, once said at the end of his life: ‘If you have understood something, you can simply say it.’ Peter wasn’t just first able to do that at the end of his life.”



He was always open to new perspectives and listened to everyone outside of official camps. He thought “outside the box” (an American idiom he loved) and therefore had little prejudice about who he was listening to.

Despite this independence, he was always aware that he was also only a product of his society and time. He never made a secret of the fact that he was ultimately standing on Max Weber’s shoulders.

Berger was responsible for the fact that many researchers that adhere to and practice a specific religion – like myself – entered the strongly secular, if not sometimes atheistic subject, and clearly demonstrated that one’s own religious position does not make a sociologist of religion a worse scientist, at least not automatically better or worse than non-religious scientists.

Berger described himself as a “heterodox Lutheran” – in 1955–1956 he worked at the Evangelical Academy Bad Boll in Baden-Württemberg, Germany – and his religion as “a nervous Christianity, in the form of theologically very liberal Lutheranism” (*The Many Altars of Modernity*, Berlin, 2014, p. 19). English Wikipedia writes in contrast: He “was a moderate Christian Lutheran conservative.”

Once again Zulehner:

“Peter’s humour was captivating. He did not only reflect sociologically when it came to humor. He was able to entertain a circle of people a whole evening with select jokes.”

During my last visit to Boston, Berger entertained me with numerous Obama jokes.

According to Berger the sociologist, religion was also ultimately a social construction, (this is fundamental in *The Sacred Canopy*, 1967 = *Zur Dialektik von Religion und Gesellschaft*, 1994), even though the theologian in Berger naturally proceeded from certain basic religious assumptions.

He saw society and mankind and thus also religion and mankind in dialectic and circular reasoning: Individuals are produced and brought up by society and yet continuously influence this very society together with many others around them (*The Social Construction of Reality*, 1966 = *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit*, 1969, with Thomas Luckmann).

His revocation of the secularization thesis, which he himself had committedly advocated and co-developed, was certainly most impressive [Still pro secularization: *The Heretical Imperative*, 1979; most clearly against it: (ed.) *The Desecularization of the World*, 1999; “Secularism in Retreat.” *The National Interest* No. 46 (Winter 1996); “Further Thoughts on Religion and Modernity,” 2013 (German version: “[Nach dem Niedergang der Säkularisierungstheorie](#)” (PDF)].

I was there when Peter Berger publicly announced at the plenary lecture of our international conference in Istanbul on April 22, 2009 that the secularization thesis was finally at its end. His revocation of the thesis he had previously advocated and formulated had already been expressed before, but here it happened very publicly and impressively, above all thanks to the marketing machinery of our sponsor, the Templeton Foundation.

His last detailed presentation on the secularization thesis was *The Many Altars of Modernity: Towards a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralistic Age* (deGruyter: Berlin, 2014). One might ask, as Detlef Pollack does in the appendix of the book, whether Berger does not save the secularization thesis in the end with the strong emphasis placed on the pluralization of the religious landscape. In any case, Berger was of the opinion that privatization and pluralization produce the heretical imperative, in which nothing really counts for anything any longer. Pluralization means, firstly, that we have more and more religions and worldviews in one country and, secondly, that these have to grapple with secular discourse (e.g., in politics and science).

Berger actually only saw true secularization in Europe (“a Eurocentric view of the world,” *The Many Altars of Modernity*, p. 19). He also found a mostly atheistic academia there that did not want to accept that they were the exception and not the rule. ([This post online ...](#))

