

## Peter Berger – Four Benefits of His Work to the Study of Religion in IR

Written by John A. Rees

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/07/03/peter-berger-four-benefits-of-his-work-to-the-study-of-religion-in-ir/>

JOHN A. REES, JUL 3 2017

It is no surprise that The Religion Gap was launched in April 2015 with reference to the work of Peter Berger, the internationally renowned sociologist who passed away on June 27, 2017. Described by the scholar Robert Hefner as “one of the greatest sociologists of religion and modernity in the period stretching from the late 1950s to today”, Prof Berger leaves behind a legacy of research that is as unique as it is vast, including the acclaimed book co-authored with Thomas Luckman *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) that was named by the International Sociological Association as the fifth most influential sociological work of the 20th century.

How has Prof Berger’s work in sociology benefitted the study of religion in IR? I will briefly sketch four such benefits, though many more could be added.

The first of these might be described as the power of his sociological testimony. The authority of Berger’s contemporary views about religion were undergirded by a compelling story of change. Once a leading proponent of the ‘secularisation thesis’ (i.e. a belief that the agency of religion would necessarily diminish in the face of an advancing modernity) Berger experienced an evidenced-based conversion to the opposite perspective. The story of such an eminent sociologist experiencing a ‘religious turn’, as it were, was very influential among a generation of IR religionists trying to find their own voice at the margins of a discipline entrenched by secularist assumptions.

The second benefit was Peter Berger’s authority as an early advocate for the importance of religion. Although the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington led to an exponential growth of religion and IR scholarship, Berger founded the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs (CURA) at Boston University in 1985, well prior to 9/11 but also to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Thus, alongside the work of foundational thinkers such as Marty, Elstain, Wuthnow, Connolly, Appleby, Esposito, Casanova and others, Berger’s work embodied an understanding of religion as a durable entity that could be interrogated across multiple epochs and in the context of seismic change. CURA would become recognised as one the leading centres for the interdisciplinary study of religion, adding to Prof Berger’s legacy as a builder of spaces and projects that many others could inhabit and flourish within.

The third benefit is in the study of religion and economic development beyond the West. It is noteworthy that CURA’s agenda in religion research was not primarily shaped by securitisation unlike the initial post-9/11 surge of scholarship. Rather, much of the focus was in what Berger called “an exercise in neo-Weberianism” applied to the economic realm at the global level. This was epitomised in the famously titled 2010 article, “Max Weber is Alive and Well, and Living in Guatemala: the Protestant Ethic Today”. It could be argued that the discourse on religion and development is as influential in international policy thinking as the more widely publicised intersection of religion and security. Berger’s thinking was ahead of the curve in many of these considerations.

The fourth benefit Prof Berger has brought to the study of religion and IR is a balanced consideration of informal and formal expressions of religion. In *A Rumour of Angels* (1969) Berger affirmed the importance of religiosity as finding transcendence in the everyday practices of life, countering the theological movement declaring ‘God is Dead’ in the aftermath of the horrors of war and the Holocaust. Yet Berger’s subsequent framing of a desecularised world never pitted informal everyday practices of religion against the importance and ongoing relevance of religious institutions.

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There is a pressure in current IR religion scholarship to see the everyday and the institutional domains of religion as oppositional. Berger's work potentially models an integrated yet dialectical alternative, and in so doing, might save the sub-discipline of religion in IR from turning in on itself.

The forthcoming wave of obituaries in honour of Peter Berger's life will no doubt deliver the full spectrum of insights regarding his legacy. One common thread that binds these remembrances together will be the recognition that in his passing we have lost a giant. Yet within that sense of loss many will also hear Berger's unwavering conviction about the fundamental importance of religion for understanding the world we inhabit. As he stated in 2006:

It's certainly useful to understand that religion is not about to disappear. The belief is still quite prevalent among intellectuals—secular intellectuals—that religion is a kind of backwoods phenomenon that with rising education will increasingly disappear. That's not happening. It's not going to happen.

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## About the author:

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