Peter Berger: ‘The Sacred Canopy’

In his work ‘The Sacred Canopy’ (1987) Peter Berger looked at the sociology of religion. He claims that humans fashion the world by their own activity – what he calls the ‘nomos’ or the socially constructed ordering of experience.

The main thrust of Berger’s argument is that humans have very weak natural instincts and so are constantly forced to choose how they behave and interact with the world. This is called ‘externalizing’ and every time we make fresh choices, we change the circumstances and our relationship with the world. We face the danger of becoming ‘off balance’ with the world.

We long for order and stability, so we can predict our responses to problems and the issues of life. So, human society creates a stable picture of the world by ‘objectivation’. That is, in our societies, we develop a sense of order and imposed it on the world and made it applicable to all people. In this way, people live in a stable, predictable and a safe way to keep out

‘...the terror that would otherwise engulf us if we did not have this order’.

For reflection: Is Berger right? Why/ why not?

Thus, society tells us, to a greater extent, what to do, what to teach our children and our role in life – child, students, worker, parent, spouse) and how to act accordingly. This is called ‘socialization’ and, to work effectively, everyone must accept these principles for themselves. This is called ‘internalization’ and is the nomos – society’s view of the world and how we should live in it. It is the product of centuries of human choices and norms which have been adapted to guide people into how to behave and protect them from anarchy and chaos.

‘The socially established nomos is our shield against terror...the most important function of society is nomization.’

He explains how the nomos works:

1. By our actions in the world we evolve principles of behaviour (externalisation)
2. The principles are accepted by most others (objectivation)
3. People accept them as principles of their own, personal behaviour (internalisation)

For Berger, the worst thing for society would be to be without a nomos – which he called a state of ‘anomy’. To avoid this possibility, society makes its nomos as strong as possible.

This is where religion comes in – societies adopt religious principles to underpin their nomos because religion is based on claims of absolute and universal truth. Religion gives humanity symbols which are rooted in the cosmos itself.
and have s special ‘sacred power’ which holds up the whole of cosmic reality. Religious symbols are so powerful because they express the most important values in life – religion brings meaningful order and peace to the cosmos.

**For research:** Find examples from different religions of the symbols used to express the most important values in life. Do you agree that the worst thing for society would be to be without a nomos? Why/why not?

Moreover, we learn our individual roles by reference to religion and by studying the scriptures. Equally, we learn to behave by following religious rituals which constantly remind us of the ‘true’ way of life. Also, religion gives meaning to dreams, visions and religious experiences.

Indeed, for Berger, religion is a form of knowledge that explains to us the meaning of the extraordinary events in our ordinary lives and offers a solution when things go badly wrong – for example natural disasters, evil and death.

‘Religion lies at the heart of this process for, with its religious and moral codes, it provides a foundation for the nomos’.