

Rumours, Reality and Angels – part 2

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In the April edition of the Journal I looked, in the book he co-wrote with Thomas Luckmann, *“The Social Construction of Reality”* (SCR), at the way in which the sociologist Peter Berger had viewed reality as a social construct. In this second article I want to look briefly at how Berger applies these ideas to religion in two subsequent books, *“The Social Reality of Religion”* (SRR) and *“A Rumour of Angels”* (aRoA), then to draw out some lessons for MSE. I would again like to issue a health warning: I have reflected on and developed many of Berger’s themes and ideas, so what follows is often an interpretation of Berger. I will try and flag up what is more from me!

The central tenet of *“The Social Reality of Religion”* is that because religions manifest themselves through reality building and maintaining institutions and communities, that which is ‘real’ in religious terms is objectively real because a coherent and identifiable body of people accept it as such. This does not mean that this is the only test of ‘reality’, however. As Berger has already posited, the social construction of reality is a – he would argue the - major test. Reality is social in its context and ‘religion has played a strategic part in the human enterprise of world-building’ (SRR, p.28). The main challenge to religious definitions of reality comes from the increasing number and variety of world-views on offer and the demands on the individual to inhabit several reality worlds, if not at the same time then jostling with each other.

The modern individual exists in a plurality of often competing and contradictory reality worlds, migrating back and forth between them. Each world has its own plausibility structures, supporting the individual in the tension of maintaining these worlds in some kind of balance. CHRISM is just such a plausibility structure, concerned with creating and affirming the identity of MSE. As such it is what Berger calls a ‘cognitive community’, acting – to some extent – to from and affirm the way in which members conceive of MSE. The extent to which it so acts is a function of how each member feels themselves to be and acts as a member of that community.

In *“A Rumour of Angels”* Berger addresses the question of transcendent reality, which is defined as that which I perceive as being real over and above that which is socially real. I know as ‘real’ the God of the Old and New Testaments and in the reality of what He is and has done. A Taoist however knows as ‘real’ the immanence of the ancestors and their role in day-to-day life. As I pointed up in the first article, this raises the question of how far we can be free from social dimensions of reality and knowledge so as to ‘know’ that which we perceive as transcendent is not actually general or local reality. ‘We apprehend the reality of everyday life as an ordered reality ... that appears objectified ... constituted by an order of objects that have been designated *as* objects before my appearance on the scene’ (SCR, p.35). Reality appears external to us, with an existence independent of us. It acts upon us rather than we on it. We share objectifications with others, which enables us to carry out social interaction with them. It gives both temporal and spatial structure to everyday life.

What is absolutely real for me and others with whom I affirm reality may not be seen as absolutely real by members of another cognitive communities. We notice these differences in understanding reality when we come into contact with members of those communities; contact that implicitly challenges our understanding of reality.

In terms of religious groups, our understanding of transcendent reality usually shares its general shape and many of its details with members of other groups, sufficient to recognise their reality as kindred to ours – even if we disagree on some details. A Methodist can recognise that a Baptist shares a broadly similar reality world, although even with the broad Christian reality spectrum this commonality is often strained. We can agree on certain key elements of reality with members of Jewish or Islamic communities, sharing a monotheistic outlook from, ultimately, a common community source. We may be much less comfortable though with the reality worlds of say a Hindu, a Buddhist or worshipper of nature spirits. What we do share with all ‘other’ reality constructing and affirming groups however is that each experiences a local reality – that which distinguishes and characterises the group, a general reality – that which distinguishes and characterises the wider

nexus or society of groups each considers itself to be allied to, and a transcendental reality – that which it holds to be absolutely real and true.

Irrespective of all other reasons for and claims to truth, religious truth is real because it is socially constructed and affirmed, therefore it is worthy of acceptance on those terms.

To digress for a moment. A key feature of MSEs is that they, by definition:

- are authorised (in some way) by and representative of a religious cognitive community;
- are trained (to some extent) to think theologically; and
- encounter other reality worlds and cognitive communities in day-to-day situations that are not within the cognitive boundaries of their own religious community.

Consequently MSEs are in a strong position to mediate between differing religious cognitive communities and to support others in meeting the challenges to their own faith and understanding of reality prompted by such encounters.

In *"A Rumour of Angels"* Berger turns his attention to commenting on the contemporary situation of religion – the apparent departure of the supernatural from modern society. Two comments ought to be made here. Firstly, this phenomenon was restricted to 'modern' society, and therefore to the developed world. Secondly, there has been a resurgence of interest in 'spirituality' in 'modern' society over the past 20 years, generally seen in individualistic terms and not centred on either traditional religious forms or on coherent social groups. Berger noted that most sociology of religion has focussed on the activities of the traditional religious institutions and pointed to the presence of spirituality outside these.

For Berger the supernatural denotes 'a fundamental category of religion, namely the assertion of belief that there is *an other reality* (aRoA, p.14). Religion posits a supernatural in the midst of the everyday, taken-for-granted world. Or, in terms familiar to CHRISM members:

To help ourselves and others to celebrate the presence of God into the things of the earth and the holiness of life in our work, and to see and tell the Christian story there.

Those who hold that there is a transcendent reality form a cognitive minority, whose view of the world differs significantly from that generally taken for granted. It may be true that the majority in Britain today would not yet agree with Nietzsche that 'God is dead', but they act as if they do. The world-view of those who continue to subscribe to the general view of reality we call 'Christian' find themselves increasingly cognitively marginalised *in this view*. Local realities, affirmed by each religious group, may be even more different to the general reality accepted in 'secular' society.

There are, I consider, three types of response to this (Berger had the first two): defiance, surrender and accommodation. Defiance leads to hunkering down in a cognitive bunker and steadfastly opposing other reality views. This is often seen as a sectarian response, though large, international, churches are not immune. It also locks the group into a single position; as Berger puts it: 'in religion as in politics, if one once starts to clobber the opposition, one stops clobbering at one's peril' (aRoA, p.27). Surrender means here to abandon the 'old' reality view and embrace the secularised worldview, seen (or thought) to be held by a cognitive majority. 'Modernity is swallowed hook, line and sinker, and the repast is accompanied by a sense of awe worthy of Holy Communion' (aRoR, p.34). Accommodation can take a number of forms, from compartmentalising different reality worlds (seeking to manage the consequent stresses) to modifying those elements of the 'old' reality that cannot be readily conformed to the new. This is what Rudolph Bultmann and Paul Tillich referred to as the intellectual adjustment of the Christian tradition with philosophical truth.

Berger was convinced that 'the traditional lore, and in most cases the institution in charge of this lore as well, can ... be presented as still or again "relevant" to modern man' (aRoA, p.35). He also sees the sociology of knowledge – his specialist field – as posing the specifically contemporary challenge to theology because it posits that the plausibility of views of reality depends on the social support they receive. Note here that Berger is concerned with *plausibility*. Put simply, the extent to which a view of reality is accepted is related to the level of social support it receives – a circular argument but

nonetheless insightful. If a view of reality is *thought* to have wide social support it will enlist further support. Conversely if a view of reality is *thought* to be losing acceptance, it will lose it!

Let me be controversial (though not as much as I could be): the 'pro' side debate in the UK on the legalisation of cannabis emphasises the apparent growth in support for legalisation, implicitly saying 'This is a view of reality whose time has come, subscribe to it if you do not want to be left behind'. Those who point out the medical and social effects of legalisation are rubbished as 'old-fashioned', 'out-of-date'. Whichever position wins, it will be that which gains most vocal support, not that with the more cogent case.

Berger notes that each 'new' reality view seeks to supplant older views by relativizing it, which he calls a 'hidden *double standard* ... the *past*, out of which ... tradition comes, is relativized in terms of this or that socio-historical analysis. The *present*, however, remains strangely immune from relativization ... the New Testament writers are seen as afflicted with false consciousness rooted in their time but the contemporary analyst takes the consciousness of *his* time as an unmixed intellectual blessing. The electricity and radio users are placed intellectually above the Apostle Paul. This is rather funny. More importantly, in the sociology of knowledge, it is an extraordinarily one-sided way of looking at things' (aRoA, p.58).

Each time and social group has its own plausibility structure and reality maintaining mechanisms. Once we understand this then any appeal to an alleged 'modern' consciousness loses its persuasiveness. We find ourselves on a level playing field rather than looking down from the cognitive hill we confidently assume we command. As Berger puts it, 'one has the terrible suspicion that the Apostle Paul may have been one-up cognitively after all' (aRoA, p.58).

We do not have to agree with contemporary consciousness. Modern views of reality may not be capable of conceiving the existence of angels or demons, but that does not answer the question of whether they go on existing despite our inability to conceive them. I recall a philosophy lecture on the linguistic theories of A J Ayer, held in awe for some years a generation ago, and the reaction to my pointing out that they did not stand up to Ayer's own tests. The assault was quickly relativized away by a philosophy lecturer: how could a mere student challenge the ideas of the great Professor. But which was right? As Berger puts it: 'the relativizers are relativized, the debunkers are debunked – indeed, relativization itself is somehow liquidated' (aRoA, p. 59).

Berger suggested the following 'arguments' for the continued vitality of the transcendent in modern society. He saw it as the task of theology to seek out 'signals of transcendence' within the empirical world (in particular 'prototypical human gestures' that point beyond 'natural' reality).

The argument from *order*, that common human characteristic. Ordering itself is an act of faith and expression of belief in something greater than ourselves, a reflection of the orderliness of the universe. Every ordering gesture becomes a signal of transcendence. The mother who says to her child "It will be alright" is declaring her faith in the transcendent.

The argument from *play*. Play is part of basic human existence. It sets up its own universe, in which all other time and reality is suspended.

The argument from *hope*. 'Human existence is always oriented towards the future' (aRoA, p.80) and puts its hope in the future being 'better' than the past or present. Hope is a prominent ingredient of most theodicies.

The argument from *damnation*. All human societies have a strong sense of what is permissible (though this may differ) and what so offends this that that the only adequate response is a curse of supernatural dimensions. The doer puts himself not just outside human society but outside that which it holds to transcend it; "hell is too good for him."

The argument from *humour*. Humour is an incongruity, a fundamental discrepancy from reality, in which the rules and norms of reality are set aside. In the Feast of Fools the 'normal' was turned on

its head; we do not laugh *at* Don Quixote but warm to him as doing what we would love to! If you have never read the full version of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, including the chapter on ecstasy, please do. As Berger puts it: 'human life gains the greatest part of its richness from its capacity for ecstasy ... any experience of stepping outside the taken-for-granted reality of everyday life, any openness to the mystery that surround us on all sides' (aRoA, p.96). If we lose the ability to laugh, especially at ourselves, we are confronted only by stark 'reality', and it appals us.

To return to a point implied earlier, each age is immediate to God. Therefore each 'must be carefully looked at for whatever signals of transcendence might be uniquely its own' (aRoA, p.100). This is just what Paul did in the Areopagus. This is just the task that faces MSEs today. We look for the signals of transcendence in our places and draw attention to them. So what strengths and weaknesses do we have as MSEs in this task?

Firstly, to re-emphasise the point made earlier on that CHRISM is a reality affirming structure, maintaining a 'local reality' that belongs within the umbrella of the common Christian 'general reality'. It is, I think, wise to see that local reality in broad terms: how we each conceive of MSE, its identity and task, will differ, however we share a core belief in and commitment to ministry in the workplace, recognise some distinctive signs of MSE, have our own knowledge set and our own language (or jargon) to describe what we do. We recognise one another in and through these. The existence of this local reality is itself in tension with other local realities – both within and without the Christian general reality, and in particular with local realities that define Christian ministry differently. To some within the Churches we will be seen as a threat because we do not conform in every respect to their reality structures.

Secondly, the MSE inhabits the world 'out there', on the same terms and in the same way as those outside the reality structures of the Churches. This again is a potential threat to these, but it is also a strength in that the MSEs are making the same transitions between reality worlds as most of those within the Churches. Who better placed therefore to stand alongside and support those who find it difficult to hold different realities in balance?

Thirdly, because MSEs are trained to think theologically, they are well placed to see the signs of transcendence in the taken-for-granted world. MSEs can relate differently from those within less open local reality structures to the cares, concerns and experiences of everyday life across a wide range of circumstances. To plagiarize Heineken: MSEs can reach the parts others cannot!

Finally, MSEs are also 'there', already alongside people in the working environment, when they are needed. We can be spoken to as a work colleague or as a 'vicar', or both.

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