

Rumours, Reality and Angels

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"A Rumor of Angels", October 2002 Journal, has drawn a number of responses, so I thought it appropriate to discuss the origins of that title and what it has to do with MSE. This therefore is the first of two articles that are – without apology - more sociology than theology. It gives an overview of some sociological concepts I have found very useful as an MSE and which underlie the research the article described on Spirituality and the Workplace.

"A Rumor of Angels" is the title of a book by the Austrian-born US Sociologist Peter Berger, (with 'u' in the UK edition!). It follows on from two earlier works, "The Social Construction of Reality (co-written with Thomas Luckmann) and "The Social Reality of Religion", and was written principally as a 'comfort' to theologians, who may have drawn unintended conclusions from them. I concentrate here on 'The Social Construction of Reality' and attempt to outline of what is said about 'reality'. The second article will apply this to the field of religion and to MSE, looking more closely at the two later books. The abbreviations SCR, SRR and aRoA are used for the books. (A fourth book, "The Scared Canopy", does not – yet – reside in my library so I have not referred to it, though part of the same body of writing). If there is any deficiency or misrepresentation, the fault is entirely mine, as are many of the examples.

Berger approaches sociology from an essentially Christian perspective and has undertaken significant work with various churches in the US; this is no 'cultured despiser'. He states in the preface to aRoA (p.10), "I consider myself a Christian, though I have not yet found the heresy into which my views would comfortably fit." (A broad grin of agreement to that).

Berger and Luckmann's field is the sociology of knowledge: how human knowledge is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations. 'The sociology of knowledge understands human reality as socially constructed reality. Since the condition of reality has traditionally been a central problem of philosophy, this understanding has certain philosophical implications' (SCR, p.210). They set out in SCR to describe the social origins and contexts of *reality* and *knowledge*. The philosophical questions it begs are reminiscent of the debate carried on between Luther and Erasmus on the bondage of the will (more of that one later).

SCR starts by defining terms:

Reality: phenomena we recognise as having a being independent of our own volition ('we cannot wish them away', SCR p.13).

Knowledge: the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics (SCR, p.13).

We take our understanding of reality and knowledge for granted, however these will differ for each society and social group. Within what is real and known for us, individuals have freedom of will and operate in the security of their reality world, in 'the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives'. It is a world 'that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these' (SCR, p.33). Reality is thus social in its context and 'religion has played a strategic part in the human enterprise of world-building' (SRR, p.28).

Within our world of being we perceive different spheres of reality, with different objects presenting themselves as constituents of these spheres. 'I am conscious of the world as consisting of multiple realities ... as I move from one reality to another, I experience the transition as a kind of shock' (SCR, p.35).

The realities in and with which we live can be broadly grouped into three types – local, general and transcendent (my way of putting it). The distinction between local and general realities tends to sharpen according to the complexity (in terms of division of labour) of a society. The more specialised individuals and social groups within a society become, the more sharply differentiated are local realities from the general and from one other. The local realities we live with are the reality worlds we move in: family, workplace, church, and social club. Each has a reality that is specific to it and symbols (including language) to reinforce that reality. Each also has its knowledge 'set', its assumptions about what is known that is specific to it. Each develops symbols to emphasise distinctiveness: club kit, a prayer book, induction rituals. Each also develops a language of it's own, one that will (normally) be sufficiently recognisable to others within the general reality but will have a special meaning to members of the social group comprising the local reality. To use the analogy of the athletic club: PB, fartlek, LSD and intervals are all part of the language of a social group sharing that local reality; the joiner can learn the language and its meaning, becoming part of the group by doing so.

General reality for me is that I am a British male, with a heritage based on independence, democracy and tolerance. One of the functions of general reality is to integrate the potentially competing local realities and to ease movement between them, lessening the shock that such movement entails. I am aware that others do not share my local realities, or more than a few of them. I am also aware that there are those who do not share my general reality; it is different, I find, from a citizen of the USA, and more different still from a Zimbabwean.

Transcendent reality – which Berger addresses in SRR - is 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. I am aware that a Hindu knows something rather different to be 'real'. The point where the sociology of knowledge touches the philosophy of knowledge is how far we can be free from social dimensions of reality and knowledge so as to 'know' that what we perceive as transcendent is not actually general or local reality. (The implication of Luther's argument is that we cannot; Erasmus thought we could at least see it, though only grasp it by grace).

'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.

We navigate this structure by signs. Language is the most important sign system in our reality and gives social meanings, 'Language originates in and has its primary reference to everyday life' (SCR, p.35). It transcends the here and now and bridges the different spheres in a reality structure (my general reality) 'and integrates them into a meaningful whole' (SCR, p.54). Language both transcends and integrates; enabling us to actualise the world we live in at any moment. It enables us to participate in the common stock of knowledge; without it social life becomes problematic in ways that can only be tackled by language substitutes.

'The social stock of knowledge differentiates reality by degrees of familiarity' (SCR, p.57). 'General' reality uses a largely non-specific and general stock of knowledge (Easter Monday is a Bank Holiday) while 'local' realities have a stock of more specific knowledge (Tuesdays and Thursdays are Running Club nights, Monday is Bible Study night). The work arena shows this clearly: 'My knowledge of my own occupation and its world is very rich and specific, while I have only a very sketchy knowledge of the occupational worlds of others' (SCR, p.57). In both contexts the stock is constantly developing and changing as 'new' or different knowledge is integrated into it. The confirmation that this has happened is that the 'new' knowledge has always been so, and as long as knowledge works satisfactorily we are prepared to suspend doubts about it.

Reality and knowledge are perceived as objective. Knowledge becomes detached from its social origins and is 'raised to the level of a relatively autonomous sub-universe of meaning' ... having 'the capacity to act back on the collectivity that has produced it' (SCR, p.104). We perceive a reality world of institutions and typified roles, acting on us from the outside. We act within socially defined roles (as Shakespeare realised) that are seen to reinforce the institutionality of society. We perceive society as a reality over and above us, rather than as the product of interaction between ourselves and other individuals. Each sub-universe has its own version of reality, each seen to act upon us, objectified. This objectification is called reification: the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, 'such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will' (SCR, p.106). The relationship between person and world is reversed: we become the product of the world rather than its producer.

This raises the problem of legitimation between sub-universes that are – potentially at least – competing with one another. Legitimation 'produces new meanings that serve to integrate the meanings already attached to disparate institutional processes' (SCR, p.107). This is necessary as 'the totality of the individual's life ... must be made subjectively meaningful ... the individual's biography must be endowed with a meaning that makes the whole subjectively plausible' (SCR, p.110). What the individual experiences and perceives to be real, in each social group to which they belong, must be meaningful and legitimate to that individual, each local reality and the movements between them part of a comprehensible whole. 'Legitimation explains the institutional order' (SCR, p.111); the individual thus 'knows' what is 'right' and acts accordingly.

A sub-universe (a local reality) may wish to keep outsiders ignorant of its existence (some religious groups do this) and will develop ways of keeping outsiders out. It may want special privileges and recognitions from society at large and may use 'various techniques of intimidation, rational and irrational propaganda ... mystification and ... the manipulation of prestige symbols' to achieve this (SCR, p.105). (The rationale employed by some pro-Israel groups can be cited here). However, insiders have to be kept in, requiring 'the development of both practical and theoretical procedures by which the temptation to escape from the sub-universe can be checked' (SCR, p. 105). (Dumping the desk contents of an employee defecting to a rival at the front door of the office is principally for the benefit of those who might wish to do likewise).

A part of legitimation is the construction of symbolic universes (already alluded to above). 'They are the sheltering canopies over the institutional order as well as individual biography. They also provide the delimitation of social reality ... they set the limit of what is relevant in terms of social interaction' (SCR, p.120). This nomic structure puts everything in its 'proper' place, especially in relation to the individual. At its most basic:

God is in his heaven and all's well with the world. Rites of passage are an important part of a symbolic universe; we develop these where they are perceived as needed: a rite of thanks for a new-born child, an admission ceremony to a professional body, the end of term disco, the little rituals we perform before leaving our place of work at the end of the day. Significant or done with little thought, all these actions are symbolic and ease our movements from one local reality to another, affirming each in the process.

The symbolic universe must also locate death. Death more than anything else threatens chaos on the orderly world we inhabit. 'All legitimations of death must carry out the same essential task – they must enable the individual to go on living in society after the death of significant others and to anticipate his own death with, at the very least, terror sufficiently mitigated so as not to paralyse the continued performance of everyday life' (SCR, p.118). There is a 'good' death, and rites exist to affirm this. The arrival in the UK of coffins bearing service personnel killed in Iraq showed these rites clearly: commentary about death met bravely in the service of country, military bands playing solemn music, the measured tread of the bearers, the surplises of Chaplains fluttering in the breeze.

The threat of chaos, though largely and successfully kept at bay by the symbolic universes we have constructed, is ever present. Our lives are precarious and the threat of anomic terror, all our certainties being pulled from under us, may be unleashed by a sudden and traumatic event, particularly the death of someone well known who dies violently or suddenly. The death of Diana, Princess of Wales was just such an occasion, or Elvis Presley, John F. Kennedy, Rudolph Valentino. The public scenes of distress were the same. Events like this must be – and are – followed quickly by 'solemn reaffirmations of the continuing reality of the sheltering symbols' (SCR, p.121): funeral rites, memorial service, specially written songs associating the person with others who have died tragically.

The process by which we 'learn' the symbolic universe and institutional order of the society in which we live sociologists call socialization. Society becomes our subjective reality, through a threefold process (SCR, p.149): externalisation, objectivation and internalisation. We learn to see the social world as 'real' and external to us. We see it as having an objective existence independent of us. We internalise it so that it becomes part of us. We own it. Internalisation is a basis for understanding our fellows and for 'the apprehension of the world as a meaningful and social reality' (SCR, p.150). We are inducted by socialization into a world that is 'given' for us. Primary socialization takes place in childhood, but we may and do undergo secondary socialization when we enter a new sector of society.

Primary socialization internalizes a reality apprehended as inevitable' (SCR, p.167). It is successful if this reality is perceived as such most of the time; it can though be threatened by the marginal situations of human experience. 'The reality of everyday life maintains itself by being embodied in routines, which is the essence of institutionalization. Beyond this ... the reality of everyday life is reaffirmed in the individual's interaction with it' (SCR, p.169). This takes place in a 'conversation' between the individual and society, where all others, significant or not, play a part in world re-affirmation, like a chorus. 'Language constitutes both the most important content and most important instrument of socialization' (SCR, p.153). This can be emphasised by pointing out differences in languages. Each has word-sets conveying reality meanings that may have no direct equivalent in another language. It is not possible to translate certain words in German into English. The reality-worlds they convey are different. Finnish has a word, *mu*, meaning 'other', in the sense 'the question does not admit of the answer'. English speakers often ask for the answer 'in a word', but we do not have one beyond yes or no.

Successful socialization will result in the 'establishment of a high degree of symmetry between objective and subjective reality' (SCR, p.183). Where it is unsuccessful the individual is nonetheless assigned a role, one in which their presence does not threaten the taken-for-granted reality but is accommodated within it. The leper is a leper, and lepers behave as lepers do; everyone 'knows' this. The lepers may though join together (in a colony) and develop their own sub-sphere of knowledge that can become a threat to society as a whole. To society they may be lepers, but to the leper group they may be children of God. This can be done outside such a group too, with some success, as with Ghandi redefining untouchables as *harijans*, children of God. The potential for tension where role definitions are sharply differentiated is obvious.

Where discrepant worlds are generally available in a society on a market basis, 'there will be an increasingly general consciousness of the relativity of *all* worlds, including one's own' (SCR, p.192). It becomes *a* world rather than *the* world. The individual can to a degree detach himself or herself from the role they are acting out, becoming aware that they are an actor.

'The possibility of individualism (that is, of individual choice between discrepant realities and identities) is directly linked to the possibility of unsuccessful socialization' (SCR, p.190). Particularly where a range of alternative realities is available, an individual can choose to alternate between identities. If they choose an identity denied by society, that identity can become a fantasy, objectivated within the individual's consciousness as his real self

(Walter Mitty). Here Berger and Luckmann perhaps overlook one point: it is possible to inhabit several reality worlds, and thus several roles, at the same time. It is possible to 'be' a gas fitter and a father and right back in the pub football team at once. Each role belongs to a different local reality (especially the last? Excuse the pun). So long as these are not mutually exclusive the movement between them is 'managed' by plausibility structures. They co-exist happily.

The basic structure of secondary socialization has to resemble that with which we are already familiar, primary. In both the process is effected through significant others: parents, priests, managers and so on. Through them we learn what is normative. In secondary socialization we acquire role-specific knowledge and vocabularies, specific to the sub-worlds we live in. Each sub-world may be partial in relation to the base-world but is coherent and complete within itself in terms of the reality it encompasses and defines. The socialization of religious personnel is particularly demonstrative of the 'ritual and material symbols' employed. 'The techniques applied ... are designed to intensify the affective character of the socialization process. Typically they involve the institutionalisation of an elaborate initiation process, a novitiate, in the course of which the individual comes to commit himself fully to the reality that is being internalized' (SCR, p.164).

Socialization as a process of universe-maintenance is never completely successful. How successful and plausible is tested by how those on the edges are integrated (or otherwise). Children are the obvious significant group here: they ask awkward questions and do those things that ought not to be done. But they are expected to understand their place in terms of being individuals being socialised, learning to be members of society. Those who do not accept or learn this are quickly labelled delinquent and a range of therapies employed to bring them to conformity. Idiosyncratic adults are a different matter. Idiosyncrasies become problematic 'if deviant versions of the symbolic reality come to be shared by groups of inhabitants ... the deviant version congeals into a reality in its own right, which ... challenges the reality status of the symbolic reality as originally constituted. The group ... becomes the carrier of an alternative definition of reality' (SCR, p.124). In practice most alternative definitions of reality do not pose a significant threat to the original symbolic universe. A bridge club with 'house rules' is hardly going to threaten the political institutions of the country, though it might irritate the game's ruling body. Some are perceived as a real threat though, a heresy indeed: the Roman Catholic church and Lutherans, Calvinists, Waldenses, Mazzini's Socialists.

This problem also occurs where one society is confronted by another 'having a greatly different history' (SCR, p.125). Here there is an alternative symbolic universe with an 'official' tradition and taken-for-granted reality equal to one's own. 'Heretical' groups in one's own society can be dismissed as mad, bad or dangerous to know, but another society can see our 'definitions of reality as ignorant, mad or downright evil' (SCR, p.125) with just as much validity as we can theirs. (The incredulity expressed by many US troops at not being immediately welcomed in Iraq as liberators bears witness to this). In order to maintain the plausibility of our own symbolic universe, 'the alternative universe presented by the other society must be met with the best possible reasons for the superiority of one's own' (SCR, p. 126). That the alternative universe exists at all demonstrates that ours is not as inevitable as we like to think it is. The same can be said of local realities within our own society. When these external or internal alternatives become a threat sophisticated conceptual machineries are employed to protect the symbolic universe: mythology, theology, philosophy, science. (I would add history and sociology).

Mythology is 'a conception of reality that posits the on-going penetration of the world of everyday experience by sacred forces' (SCR, p.128). It sees a high degree of continuity between everyday social worlds and the cosmic order. It covers not just the myth-worlds of primitive societies, but practices such as reading horoscopes or turning over a sixpence (probably now a 5p piece) at the sight of a new moon. A great deal of 'secular mythology' also exists, social traditions or modes of behaviour that are legitimised by use.

'For our ... purposes, theological thought may be distinguished from its mythological predecessor simply in terms of its greater degree of theoretical systematization' (SCR, p.129). Whereas mythology posits continuity between the human and divine worlds, it now appears as broken, theology serving to mediate between the two worlds. Whereas mythological knowledge is little different from the common stock of knowledge, theological knowledge is further removed, more specialised.

Philosophy in turn grew out of theology and in many of its manifestations is a secularised theology. The secularising process has been progressive in increasingly complex societies, at least as viewed in the 'West'. From theology on, 'forms of conceptual machinery became the property of specialist elites whose bodies of knowledge were increasingly removed from the common knowledge of society as a whole' (SCR, p. 130).

'Modern science is an extreme step in this development, and in the secularisation and sophistication of universe-maintenance' (SCR, p.130). This process becomes ever further removed from the 'lay' member of society, but they do know who the specialists are and accept as plausible the specialist knowledge they use to explain the world.

These 'stages' are not proposed as an evolutionary scale, rather as society becomes increasingly complex and sophisticated each successive conceptual machinery is layered over the others. There is still a mythological reality accepted as real by most members of complex societies; it may not be the same as that of a simple society, but it exists. It is perhaps this reality that underlies the 'spiritual longing' perceived to remain strong in 'modern' society.

Each 'knowledge set' has its own specialists: those who are seen as having special expertise in that field and who serve to legitimate it in the role they act out. They claim jurisdiction over 'their' sector of the societal stock of knowledge. They use symbols and language to demonstrate and reinforce their position and role as specialists. The fortune-teller is a 'gypsy' named Lee. The priest insists in being called 'Father' and wearing black. The philosopher talks in riddles and publishes a popular novel based on a particular mediaeval school of thought. The scientist (Professor or Doctor) announces that theological belief is immature and publishes popular answers to the question of life, the universe, everything. We believe them. They are the guardians of the realities in which they and we live. Where they disagree, we find ways of holding two contradictions to be true, and do not worry so long as the plausibility structures of each can be kept apart in our compartmentalised lives.

The potential for tension between alternate realities within our own society always exists. Where there are deviant realities the following responses are possible: Liquidate (witches, Albigenses, Jews), Integrate (folk beliefs and old gods being 'baptised as Christian stories, pagan festivals as Christian festivals), Segregate (Jews in mediaeval Europe, some migrants in Britain today). The fact remains that 'most modern societies are pluralistic – they have a shared core universe taken for granted as such and different partial universes co-existing in a state of mutual accommodation' (SCR, p.142; these correspond to my general and local reality) ... 'outright conflict between ideologies has been replaced by varying degrees of tolerance or even cooperation.'

In a pluralistic society de-monopolisation of specialist knowledge takes place. Specialists have to find ways to continue maintaining the old tradition while legitimating (or denying) pluralism. Behaving as if nothing has happened is not generally taken seriously by others, but pluralism changes the social position of traditional definitions of reality and the ways they are held in the consciousness of individuals. Thus a church that does not change with the times risks of becoming irrelevant, while one that does risks the plausibility of its world-view in the face of alternatives.

Within our general reality we alternate between local realities, often several times a day. We do not usually notice this as the reality affirming structures assure us that the local realities are consistent and no harm will befall us by so moving. Some alternation is however more threatening and complete, requiring a process of re-socialization. The existing nomic structure internalized by the individual may have to be dismantled and disintegrated and the person re-socialized into a new one. Religious conversion is the 'historical prototype' of this kind of alternation (SCR, p.177), *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* being 'the empirically successful accomplishment of conversion. ... It is only within the religious community, the *ecclesia*, that the conversion can be effectively maintained as plausible.' Conversion may come first (Saul of Tarsus), but to be maintained requires the plausibility structure of the community, otherwise it will become merely an experience. 'Saul may have become Paul in the aloneness of religious ecstasy, but he could *remain* Paul only in the context of the Christian community that recognised him as such and confirmed the new being in which he now located his identity.' These plausibility structures must become the individual's world, displacing his old world. The success of religious structures makes it no accident that the most successful secular equivalents have borrowed heavily from religious models: political indoctrination, psychotherapy, Alcoholics Anonymous, and many more. The individual experiences a rupture in their biography; all past knowledge and experience is re-interpreted in the light of what they now 'know'. Paul re-interpreted his own biography accordingly, 'when I was a child I thought as a child, but now ...'.

Berger and Luckmann's venture in the field of sociology covers ground well trod by practitioners of other disciplines but from another perspective, and it is this fresh perspective that shines light on old arguments. Berger has gone on to produce a considerable corpus of books on the themes it introduces. The central premise of "The Social Construction of Reality" is that the concept and perception of what is real is, for each social group and its members, both a social construct and mediated socially, to an extent that the members of the group are not aware of this in the course of their everyday lives. As Dorrie Johnson puts it, "Each organisation ... will have its own culture, its own character." I want to suggest here, and develop later, that MSE in general and CHRISM in particular have their own cultures. They are sub-groups (I use the plural carefully), each with a local reality that is distinct from the larger local realities of both Church and employing organisation. There are many MSEs out with CHRISM, who would not immediately identify with the latter's perception of reality on where MSE stands vis a vis Church and work.

Michael Ranken (January 2003 Journal) makes a perceptive point: "Reality is not a social construct; every human perception of Reality is." How, then, can we change perceptions? And how will the individual escape from the human perception that is a social construct in order to perceive purely the Reality that is not? Luther's

answer to the latter was that we cannot; only (external) Grace can free the individual from the bondage of social construct as of sin. Erasmus took the view that the individual could perceive the reality of God, needing God's grace to then grasp it. I'm with the Dutchman.

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There is a good summary of The Social Construction of Reality at: <http://www.theology.ie/thinkers/berger.htm>