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Peter Berger's Early Work on Baha'i Studies

At the very beginning of his academic career, Peter Berger made an important contribution to the sociological study of the Babi and Baha'i religions. This article provides an overview of (1) Berger's early ideas in the sociology of religion; (2) his overall analysis of the Babi and Baha'i movements; (3) his account of the contemporary Iranian Baha'i community; and (4) his impressions of the American Baha'i community of the time. A brief discussion of the continuing value of Berger's Babi-Baha'i study in the Sociology of Religion and in Baha'i Studies is also offered.

Peter Berger (1929–2017) went on to become one of the major figures in the contemporary Sociologies of Religion, Knowledge and Modernity, but at the very beginning of his academic career he made a brief, but significant and pioneering contribution to the sociological study of the Babi and Baha'i religions. It is that contribution which I will briefly describe here. I will then provide a short critique of some of the points he makes and comment on the continuing value of his work.¹

Born in Vienna in 1929, Berger first encountered the Baha'i Faith around 1945, at the immediate end of the Second World War, when he was in Palestine. He would then have been about 16 years old. He met the Baha'is in Haifa at this time, and tried several times to gain an audience with Shoghi Effendi, the then Baha'i leader, but was unsuccessful. He did, however, meet both Ruhiyyih Khanum and Riaz Effendi, respectively Shoghi Effendi's wife and younger brother.² Some time after this, Berger moved to the United States with his parents, gaining a Bachelor of Arts degree before enrolling at the New School for Social Research in New York City for his post-graduate work. Originally intending to become a Lutheran minister, he instead became

1. My thanks to Will van den Hoonard, Moojan Momen, and Seena Fazel for reading through an early draft of this article and making useful suggestions for improvements.

2. P. L. Berger, "From Sect to Church: A Sociological Interpretation of the Baha'i Movement" (Unpublished PhD thesis, New School of Social Research, 1954), 141 n36.

an “accidental sociologist.”³ His unpublished PhD dissertation was completed in 1954, and was entitled “From Sect to Church: A Sociological Interpretation of the Baha’i Movement.” This was the first proper sociological study of the Babi and Baha’i religions if we exclude the earlier rather doctrinaire studies by M. S. Ivanov in the Soviet Union.⁴ This was followed by a useful article “Motif messianique et processus social dans le Bahaisme” in the 1957 volume of the *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, and a couple of minor references to his sociological framework elsewhere.⁵ Berger then moved on to other areas of intellectual inquiry, and his work on Baha’i was largely forgotten — essentially until rediscovered in the 1970s, and incorporated into the contemporary sociological study of the Babi and Baha’i religions.⁶ Berger himself did not return to Baha’i Studies.

Although overshadowed by his later work in terms of sociological theory, it is a pity that Berger’s work on Baha’i has been largely neglected. His insights are perceptive, even though much of his historical account is now quite dated. At the time he wrote, of course, academic interest in the Babi and Baha’i religions was almost non-existent — the earlier surge of interest represented by scholars such as Edward G. Browne (1862–1926) and A. L. M. Nicolas (1864–1939) had long since collapsed, and it was not until the 1970s that it developed anew.⁷

What then did Berger say? His thesis is quite short by modern standards — a mere 194 pages, part of which comprises his accounts of Babi and Baha’i history and belief — necessarily relying on secondary sources, and the published articles are merely summaries of material in the thesis. I will summarise his work here under four headings: (1) Berger’s early ideas in the sociology of religion; (2) Berger’s overall analysis of the Babi and Baha’i movements; (3) His account of the contemporary Iranian Baha’i community; and (4) His impressions of the American Baha’is.

Berger’s Early Sociology of Religion

Berger’s view of key concepts in the sociology of religion changed markedly over the course of his career — most notably his eventual rejection of the secularisation thesis and embrace of the concept of pluralism as the defining characteristic of the modern religious world. Berger’s early ideas on the field

3. P. L. Berger, *Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist: How to Explain the World without Becoming a Bore* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2011).

4. M. S. Ivanov, *Babidski Vostanii i Irane, 1848–1852* (Moscow, 1939); M. S. Ivanov, “Babism” and “Babi Uprisings,” (trans.) *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 2: 521.

5. P. L. Berger, “Motif Messianique et Processus Social Dans le Bahaisme,” *Archives de Sociologie des Religions* 4 (1957): 93–107; P. L. Berger, “The Sociological Study of Sectarianism,” *Social Research* 21 (1954): 467–85; P. L. Berger, “Sectarianism and Religious Sociation,” *American Journal of Sociology* 64 (1958): 41–44.

6. P. Smith, “Motif Research: Peter Berger and the Baha’i Faith,” *Religion* 8, no. 2 (1978): 210–34. Berger’s concept of religious motifs is used extensively in P. Smith, *The Babi and Baha’i Religions: From Messianic Shi’ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987; reissued 2008).

7. The renewal of academic interest in Babi-Baha’i Studies was effectively marked by H. M. Balyuzi, *Edward Granville Browne and the Baha’i Faith* (London: George Ronald, 1970).

are of more than historical interest, however, and some at least, I think, still have lasting value. The three topics of major concern to him here were: (1) sects and their routinisation into churches; (2) the concept of religious motifs; and (3) meaning systems and the situation of pluralism.

Berger first located his own work in the American sociology of religion of his time. Clearly, his focus was on the internal dynamics and social and cognitive structures of religious groups rather than the relationship between religious groups and the wider society — which he saw as the then dominant American concern. He also expressed his opposition to what he regarded as two false paths in current sociology: the reduction of social phenomena to psychological character types and processes, and the reduction of religious phenomena to a set of socio-economic determinants. By contrast, Berger's approach was phenomenological, and followed in the traditions of Max Weber, Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and Joachim Wach.⁸ It was not the psychological aspects of conversion that should be of interest to sociologists but rather the "inner meaning" of conversion for the actors themselves which enabled sociologists to understand the resultant social phenomena. Again, religious action was to be understood as an interaction between religious groups and the wider social institutions of their environing society rather than as something merely determined by that society.

Sects and their Routinisation into Churches

There was already a long and complex history of definition of church and sect at the time Berger wrote, later sociologists developing Weber's original ideas in various different directions. Berger sought a distinction on the basis of specifically religious criteria rather than the relationship to political power, or organisational forms, or the means by which grace was administered to the faithful, or the social class of members. Building on the ideas of Carl Meyer and Rudolf Sohm, he proposed that the sect should be understood as a religious grouping which was based on the belief that spirit (*pneuma*) was immediately present, whilst the church was based on the belief that the spirit was remote. Spirit here was whatever was the object of religious experience — the "holy" (*numen*) in Otto's terms. Both sect and church occupied an intermediate location between the spirit and the world, but the sect was closer to the spirit and the church to the world with which it effectively merged. The church had made its peace with the world, and had thus been invaded by its social realities, whilst the sect set itself apart from the world in what Meyer had termed an "island formation."⁹

For Berger, this distinction between church and sect was fundamentally linked to what Weber had termed the "routinisation of charisma." The process of routinisation was one in which the sect became a church as the group became more distant from the spirit. In this process, it became necessary to

8. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 145–46.

9. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 151–53. The reference is to Carl Mayer, *Sekte und Kirche: Ein religionssoziologischer Versuch* (Heidelberg: Weiss, 1933).

create some “mediating apparatus” for the group in order to maintain the links with the spirit.¹⁰ For sectarians, the spirit was near and their shared religious experience was immediate and unifying. They constituted a compact unified group and did not need institutional forms to hold them together. By contrast, the members of a church were remote from the spirit, and were only brought together socially by the establishment of formal ecclesiastical forms and institutions. Legal authority replaced charisma, and as a worldly institution, the church relied in part at least on psychological or physical force and coercion to keep its members together and ensure their compliance to its laws.¹¹

There were also complexities. Both churches and sects developed their own specific relationships with the spirit, and it was of note that permanent sects could be established on the basis of the continuing closeness of the spirit — so avoiding or delaying routinisation, as in the Pentecostal movement. Again, it was possible for there to be sectarian developments within a church (*ecclesiola in ecclesia*) — as with Catholic monasticism — providing believers with the sense of the immediacy of the spirit, but not necessarily leading to sectarian separation.¹²

Religious Motifs

Sociologists have long devised typologies of sects, seeking to fit different religious groups into separate conceptual categories. Berger’s approach was different, as he borrowed (and considerably altered) the concept of “motif” from the “Lund School” of Lutheran theology as represented by the work of Anders Nygren and Gustav Aulén. In Berger’s adaptation, the motif was any “specific pattern” or *gestalt* of religious experience that could be followed through in the historical development of a particular religious movement. It was not an intellectual idea or a theological formulation — although it might well be expressed in such formulations. By understanding such “fundamental patterns” as they were expressed over time, the “totality” of the particular religious experience could also be understood so that its central elements could be distinguished from its ephemeral ones. As with typologies, these motifs would be abstractions from the reality of the experience, but they were the “only way” to scientific understanding.¹³

It was possible to identify a number of such general motifs in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic context, specifically an emphasis on religion as lived experience, a message to be proclaimed, or a secret to be divulged (“Enthusiastic”, “Prophetic,” and “Gnostic” motifs in Berger’s terminology). These motifs were each a particular way in which believers thought that the spirit might be manifested. The motifs could be subdivided, most importantly between chiliastic (millenarian) and legalistic forms of the prophetic motif.

10. Berger, “From Sect to Church,” 154–55.

11. Berger, “From Sect to Church,” 168.

12. Berger, “From Sect to Church,” 154–55.

13. Berger, “From Sect to Church,” 159.

More detailed analysis had to be made in terms of the specific cultural-religious context that was being studied. The motif concept was a tool of analysis, not a set of pigeon-holes to which to assign particular religious groups. The motifs were neither fixed nor exclusive. Thus, a religious group could change its central religious concerns over time, or combine several motifs simultaneously.¹⁴

In some cases, the dominant motif might generate specific attitudes towards the world on the part of the religious movement, as well as characteristic internal social structures, which were formed in such a way as to make possible the mission which the sect members felt they had to fulfil. Thus, "prophetic" religious movements, whose members felt they had a message to be proclaimed to the world, were likely to be "militant" (or activist?) in their attitude towards the world — the world had to be warned or conquered. They were also likely to favour strong organisation and leadership. By contrast, "gnostic" groups, which felt they had a secret to be divulged, were more likely to be indifferent to the world and organise as a circle of initiates, guarding their esoteric knowledge from outsiders. Again, "enthusiastic" sects, which emphasised the importance of lived experience, could be very diverse, both in their attitude towards the world and their internal social structure. In all cases, a sect's relationship with the world would change over time in the process of routinisation, as worldly concerns became more important and it became more "church-like."¹⁵

Pluralism and Meaning Systems

Finally, Berger briefly examined the challenge to meaning presented by what he later came to term "pluralism," that is, the coexistence of a number of separate and often contradictory meaning systems in modern Western society. The once common sense of belonging to a shared meaning system had collapsed. A unified Christendom no longer existed in Western consciousness, so there was no longer a common frame of reference to which all Westerners could appeal.

Unlike his later embrace and celebration of pluralism, the young Berger saw the lack of a shared sense of belonging as profoundly alienating for the individual and even "demonic."¹⁶ It became the "seedbed" of sectarianism, not just in religion, but in politics, the arts, and sciences. New meaning systems abounded, and even well-established and once all-embracing systems such as Roman Catholicism became merely another choice. All had a sectarian character. Each "sect," whether religious or secular, became an independent meaning system, each "perfectly closed within itself," separated from the others, and with no shared system of communication.

This was a situation in which individuals might move from one meaning system to another only by a leap of faith rather than rational choice. This had become an "age of conversion," in which switching from one belief system

14. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 155–56.

15. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 156–57.

16. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 183.

to another had replaced communication and argument. The fervent Catholic might become a communist, or an anarchist, or take up one of the various rival schools of psychotherapy. “Extreme passion” raged in “extreme isolation.”¹⁷ The experience of conversion was valued in itself as a passage from darkness into light, or from a lower to a higher level of existence.¹⁸

Although varying greatly in their intellectual sophistication, these competing meaning systems tended to share an “inner dynamic” characterised by (1) an assertion of extreme authority; (2) a claim to all-embracing universal validity; (3) the promise of providing a path to superior and perhaps esoteric understanding (and perhaps the guarding of these “truths” from outsiders); (4) a belief in salvation for its believers; (5) a stress on the importance of conversion; (6) a camaraderie of community — together believers both shared knowledge of true reality and confronted a world which remained in unenlightened darkness; (7) a sense of historical destiny; (8) a system of apologetics, by which alternative meaning systems could be understood and answered; and (9) a system of pastoral care (Berger used the Lutheran term *Seelsorge*), whereby the questions of those within the movement could be answered, and any doubts about the system’s truth be isolated and dispelled.¹⁹ For Berger, all these characteristics were to be found in the contemporary American Baha’i community.

The pronounced religious and secular sectarianism which Berger saw as characteristic of modern life was expressed in what I would describe as a Manichean view of the world. Outside of the believers’ meaning system lay nothing but “darkness and error.” Rival meaning systems might be incorporated as subordinate elements within it, or condemned to “intellectual damnation.” Outsiders who knew the movement’s “truths” but did not accept them were seen as a threat. Those believers who rejected the authority of a movement’s leaders were dismissed as rebels, subject to what we would now call “othering” if they did not repent, and were punished by “existential assassination” through excommunication — or in the case of some political movements actual physical liquidation.

Berger’s Analysis of the Babi and Baha’i Movements

Berger sought to reach a sociological understanding of what he regarded as the two fundamental transformations which the Babi-Baha’i movement had experienced in its relatively short history: (1) the process of routinisation, whereby the original sect-like movement transitioned to become church-like, and (2) the transplantation of the movement from the Middle East to the West.²⁰ Completed in 1954, Berger’s study predated the massive expansion

17. Berger, “From Sect to Church,” 183.

18. Berger, “From Sect to Church,” 176–77.

19. Berger, “From Sect to Church,” 182–87.

20. Like many other writers, including the Baha’i leader Shoghi Effendi Rabbani in his 1944 history, *God Passes By*, Berger treats the Babi and Baha’i movements as component parts of a single religion. There are significant differences between the two, however, even though most of the Babis who survived the collapse of their own movement later became Baha’is (see Smith, *The Babi and Baha’i Religions*).

of the Baha'i Faith into the Global South, a process which began in the late 1950s.²¹

To aid in his study, Berger identified two separate motifs in Babi-Baha'i history: an initial prophetic chiliasm (which eventually morphed into prophetic legalism, so perhaps we should say that there were actually three motifs), and a subordinate gnostic motif.²² Both chiliastic and gnostic motifs were well entrenched in the form of Shi'i Islam which predominated in Iran — out of which the Babi movement first emerged, and their complex interplay shaped the subsequent development of the Babi and Baha'i religions.

The main aspects of Berger's account of Babi-Baha'i history in terms of these motifs has been summarised elsewhere.²³ Briefly, central to Iranian Shi'ism is the complex figure of the Twelfth Imam, seen as the last in a series of divinely appointed successors of the Prophet Muhammad who had been wrongly denied power by mainstream Sunni Muslim leaders. The Twelfth Imam, who had disappeared in the Islamic year 260 (CE 873/74) was still mysteriously accessible in the world even though hidden from the mass of the faithful. His expected return as Mahdi would mark the dominance of Shi'ism over the world and a messianic end of days. The religion therefore had (and continues to have) a powerful chiliastic charge, but also embraced a belief in hidden knowledge and religious experience which was particularly marked in its more heterodox expressions.²⁴

Babism most obviously expressed Shi'i chiliasm: its founder, Mirza Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi (1819–1850), was initially widely understood to be claiming to be the intermediary (*báb*) to the Hidden Imam, and announced his divine mission in 1844 (AH 1260), a thousand lunar years after the disappearance of the last Imam, and at a time when millenarian expectation was widespread. His later claim (in 1848) to be the Imam Mahdi himself dramatically increased eschatological expectation. At the same time, however, Babism had strong links with the more esoteric forms of Shi'ism, a connection which was expressed in its subtle theophanology, in which God's prophets were manifestations of the Primal Will, the structure of the universe could be understood through numerology, and a non-literalistic view of the Resurrection could be envisaged. This esotericism was also expressed in the dispersion of theophanic authority amongst the Bab's leading disciples (in what Berger called a "charismatic field") during the period of his imprisonment (1847–1850).

21. On Baha'i expansion overall see Smith, *Babi and Baha'i Religions*, 157–95, and P. Smith, "Babi-Baha'i Expansion and 'Geo-Cultural Breakthroughs,'" *Journal of Religious History* 40, no. 2 (2016): 225–36. On the overall development of the Baha'i Faith since the 1950s see P. Smith and M. Momen, "The Baha'i Faith, 1957–1988: A Survey of Contemporary Developments," *Religion* 19 (1989): 63–91, and P. Smith, *An Introduction to the Baha'i Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 78–96.

22. For an extended use of a recharacterised version of the motif concept in an account of Babi-Baha'i history see Smith, *Babi and Baha'i Religions*, 2–3, 31–47, 72–85, 107, 112, 136–56.

23. Smith, "Motif Research."

24. For an overview of Shi'ism and the wider Shi'i tradition, see M. Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

Gaining a widespread following across Iran and into the Shi'i areas of neighbouring Ottoman Iraq, Babism generated chiliastic fervour which was seen as destabilising both by the Shi'i learned class (the *'ulamá*) and increasingly by the Iranian state (For the ulama, it was also a direct threat to their authority). Armed conflicts ensued in which much of the Babi leadership was killed. The Bab was then executed by order of the grand vizier (1850) and the Babi remnant split into a number of factions, one of which mounted an unsuccessful assassination attempt on the shah (1852), leading to the killing or exile of many of those who were known to be Babis.²⁵

Prominent amongst the Babi exiles was Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri (1817–1892), later better known by his religious title, *Bahá'u'lláh* (the “Glory of God”). Living in exile in various parts of the Ottoman Empire, he established links with the remaining Babis in Iran and worked to rebuild the shattered community, eventually laying claim in 1866 to be “He Whom God Shall Make Manifest” (*man-yuzhiruhu'lláh*), a further messianic figure foretold by the Bab. Most of the Babis accepted his claim, henceforth coming to be known as “Baha'is.” His leadership was disputed by his half-brother Mirza Yahya *Subh-i Azal* [“Morn of Eternity”] (1831/2–1912), however, and a small network of “Azali” Babis came into being in opposition to the Baha'is. Writing on a wide range of themes — ethics, [Sufi] mysticism, religious doctrine, social reform — Baha'u'llah massively expanded the scope of “Babi” thinking, establishing what really was a new religion with its own code of sacred law to replace the Islamic shari'a.²⁶

After Baha'u'llah's death in 1892, his eldest son “Abbas (now generally known as *'Abdu'l-Bahá* [“Servant of Baha”, 1844–1921]) was accepted as his appointed successor. There was again a small opposition faction, led by Abdu'l-Baha's half-brother Mirza Muhammad 'Ali (1853–1937). Meanwhile, Baha'u'llah's followers had spread his teachings within Iran, the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, British India, and Tsarist Russia, whilst during Abdu'l-Baha's period of leadership (1892–1921), the Baha'i movement began to attract followers in North America and Europe. The new and extremely active American Baha'is demonstrated the adaptability of the religion to a very different cultural and religious milieu.

For Berger, the Bab's foretelling of a further prophetic figure after himself projected the messianic motif forward “with all of its chiliastic fervour,” and

25. The details of these developments were far more complex than summarised here. For detailed analyses, see in particular A. Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), and D. MacEoin, *The Messiah of Shiraz: Studies in Early and Middle Babism* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). See also D. MacEoin, *The Sources for Early Babi Doctrine and History: A Survey* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), and the general summary in Smith, *Babi and Baha'i Religions*, 5–56. On aspects of the Bab's thought see T. Lawson, *Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam: Qur'an, Exegesis, Messianism and the Literary Origins of the Babi Religion* (London: Routledge, 2011).

26. This was mostly collected in the *Kitáb-i Aqdas* (“Most Holy Book,” c.1873). For an overview of Baha'u'llah's writings see P. Smith, *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 79–86, and individual subject entries. The Bab had also written his own book of holy law, the *Bayán* (“Exposition,” 1847–1848), but this was never widely circulated amongst his followers.

helped explain the Babis' ready acceptance of Baha'u'llah as *man-yuzhiru-hu'lláh*: he was the second messiah in a messianic age. By contrast, his half-brother both lacked charisma and represented a "premature" routinisation of the powerful chiliastic motif. Similarly, the great majority of Baha'is accepted Abdu'l-Baha as Baha'u'llah's successor: he had made no claim to messianic status, but he was a charismatic leader who further extended the sense of living in a messianic age. Again, his half-brother represented a premature routinisation of this chiliastic enthusiasm.

Commenting on the successful spread of an Iranian religious movement to the West, Berger stressed the key role played by Ibrahim Kheiralla (1849–1920), a Syrian Christian convert who taught his own (partly erroneous) version of the Baha'i message which combined two key motifs: the idea that Christ had returned in the person of Abdu'l-Baha and the hidden secret represented by Baha'i belief (1894–1900). Abdu'l-Baha rejected any messianic status for himself, but emphasised his own status as his father's successor, and a split rapidly developed within the American movement in which Kheiralla was rejected by the majority of American Baha'is, who established direct links with Abdu'l-Baha, whilst retaining a great reverence for him as a mysterious sacred figure.²⁷

Berger also noted the weakening of the "gnostic" element under Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha, as well as the increasing importance of liberal ideas of societal reform and progress — an essentially secularising rendering of the chiliastic motif.

These trends were continued under Abdu'l-Baha's chosen successor, his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897–1957), who served as "Guardian" of the Faith until his death. Under Shoghi, "prophetic legalism" replaced the earlier chiasm and the final routinisation of the movement occurred as a church-like system of administration came to prevail, and Baha'i endeavours came to be directed towards the future establishment of a new world order. For Berger, these developments shed "considerable light" on the relationship between religious motifs and social structure.²⁸ As long as the movement had been dominated by urgent chiliastic expectation, there had been little need for formal organisation, but as Baha'i objectives became directed towards the building up of a new order then detailed planning and organisation became necessary.

Berger's account of Babi-Baha'i developments in terms of changing motifs is open to criticism, but it was a useful and stimulating step towards a sociological understanding of a complex religious movement (see below). As to the details of Berger's historical account, these are now dated. Modern

27. On the early American Baha'i community see R. H. Stockman, *The Baha'i Faith in America*, 2 vols. Vol. 1: *Origins, 1892–1900* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1985); vol. 2: *Early Expansion, 1900–1912* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995); R. Hollinger, "Ibrahim George Kheiralla and the Baha'i Faith in America," in *From Iran East and West*, ed. J. R. Cole and M. Momen, 94–133 (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1984); P. Smith, "The American Baha'i Community: A Preliminary Survey, 1894–1917," in *Studies in Babi and Baha'i History*, vol. 1, ed. M. Momen, 85–223 (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1982).

28. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 159.

academic studies of Babi-Baha'i history began to appear from the 1970s onwards, with the Babi movement having received particularly detailed attention. Berger, by contrast, had to rely on the older studies by European scholars such as Edward Granville Browne, A.-L.-M. Nicolas, Hermann Roemer, Theodor A. Loeppert, and even the Comte de Gobineau.²⁹ He also made wide use of contemporary Baha'i sources, as well as the writings of the Iranian-American Baha'i dissident Ahmad Sohrab (c. 1893–1958).

In addition to his library sources, Berger conducted what was probably the first sociological survey questionnaire of Baha'is (below), and engaged in discussion with Baha'is he met in both postwar Palestine and the United States. He also corresponded with Kamar Baha, a daughter of Muhammad 'Ali.

Overall, I would judge Berger's use of his sources to be fair. The most obvious limitation is his uncritical acceptance of Browne's view of the Baha'is as having deliberately misrepresented and distorted their early history for doctrinal reasons — a charge addressed by Hasan Balyuzi in his 1970 study of Browne's writings on the Babi and Baha'i movements.³⁰

The Contemporary Iranian Baha'i Community

One of the most important sections of Berger's thesis is his account of the contemporary Iranian Baha'i community.³¹ This was based on a meeting he had with two of its leaders, Ali-Akbar Furutan (1905–2003), the then secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Iran and former head of the Tarbiyat [Baha'i] School in Tehran, and Valiyullah Varqa (1884–1955), the administrator of all Baha'i properties in Iran.³² The meeting was arranged by the New York Baha'i assembly during a visit the two men made to the United States in 1953 in connection with the inauguration ceremony of the Baha'i Temple at Wilmette, near Chicago.³³ Although Furutan and Varqa were extremely well informed, and Berger appears to have been a careful interviewer, we should remember that all these observations were based on an extended conversation rather than an authenticated written statement, so there may be inaccuracies (I mention one below). Neither of Berger's interlocutors were native English-speakers, so it is also possible that

29. For a brief overview of the work of most of these scholars see M. Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, 1844–1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981), 17–43. Momen omits to mention Loeppert, whose *Die Fortentwicklung der Babi-Baha'i in Westen* (1933) Berger found particularly useful.

30. Balyuzi, *Edward Granville Browne and the Baha'i Faith*.

31. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 124–30. For a recent collection of essays on the Iranian Baha'i community see D. P. Brookshaw and S. B. Fazel, eds., *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2008).

32. Both men were also trusted advisors of Shoghi Effendi with the honorific rank of "Hand of the Cause of God." For short biographies see B. D. Harper, *Lights of Fortitude: Glimpses into the Lives of the Hands of the Cause of God* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997) (Furutan, 211–22; Varqa, 329–32). For Berger's account of this interview see "From Sect to Church," 124–30.

33. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, *The Bahá'í World*, vol. 12, 1950–54 (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1956), 133–67.

there were misunderstandings of language.³⁴ The following summarises Berger's account of the conversation (some additional information and comments are provided in footnotes).

History

Modern Baha'i administration in Iran had begun after the overthrow of the Qajar dynasty in 1925. The founder of the new Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah (reg. 1925–1941), had been known to have Baha'i friends prior to assuming power, "especially in the army," but he found it inexpedient to grant the Baha'is public toleration, despite his moves to modernise his country and suppress the power of the ulama (Islamic leaders). Then, later in his reign, having strongly promoted Persian nationalism, Reza Shah's government became increasingly suspicious of the Baha'is, both because of their effective organisation as a community and their international connections. Baha'is were repeatedly arrested under suspicion of political conspiracy and purges removed a number of Baha'is from high positions in the army and other branches of government. Despite this, Reza Shah favoured individual Baha'is, choosing one to head the financial department of the army, and another to administer his personal estates.³⁵

Even after Reza Shah had been deposed by the Allies in 1941 during the Second World War, the situation of the Baha'is in Iran did not improve. There was much sympathy for the Baha'is in high government circles but the government could not openly favour the Baha'is for fear of antagonising the politically important Islamic leaders and their followers.³⁶ Indeed, in the immediate postwar period there was a rise in Persian nationalism which led to an effective alliance between the nationalists and the defenders of Shi'i orthodoxy against the Communist-inspired Tudeh movement. There was a revival in Islamic influence, with "fanatical" preachers appearing again in the provinces and whipping up the mass of the people against all the perceived enemies of Islam, including the Baha'is. The Baha'is' careful avoidance of all political activity did not help them. Both nationalists and Islamists were suspicious of their international links. Nor were the Baha'is shown any sympathy by the Tudeh Party, so they had no defenders amongst the political forces.

34. Berger did begin to study Persian as part of his PhD research, but I do not know what level of fluency he attained. See Riyaz Timol's blog post, <https://www.thesociologicalreview.com/blog/sociology-faith-and-islam-some-reflections-on-the-legacy-of-peter-l-berger-1929-2017.html> (accessed 11 August 2017).

35. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 130. This is a reference to Gen. Shu'a'u'llah 'Ala'i (1889–1984), who served as chief controller of army finances for 25 years (Harper, *Lights of Fortitude*, 335–38), and Mr. Nuri'd-din Fath-'Azam (1895–1952), who served as Reza Shah's personal accountant for 11 years and was eventually murdered by a village mob for his Baha'i beliefs in August 1952 — that is less than a year prior to Berger's interview with Furutan and Vaerqa (*Bahá'í World*, vol. 12, 690–92).

36. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 130.

The Baha'i Community

Baha'is claimed that they constituted the largest religious minority in Iran, a claim which Berger found reasonable. Given the community's lack of legal recognition, definite statistics did not exist. All observers agreed that there were several hundred thousand Baha'is in Iran in total, and non-Baha'i observers had estimated their numbers at between 100,000 and 200,000. As the majority of the Baha'is were still officially classified as Muslims, it was often difficult to determine who was or was not a Baha'i (and even if an accurate government census existed, it would not be very helpful).³⁷

Three categories of Baha'is could be identified: those who openly professed their faith and had registered as "declared Baha'is" and were so able to vote in elections for the Baha'i spiritual assemblies; "Baha'is by name," who were generally known to be Baha'is but did not openly participate in Baha'i community activities; and "hidden Baha'is" who publicly continued to live as Muslims, dissimulating their true beliefs according to the traditional Shi'i practice of *taqiyya* (ketman). There was also a large fringe of sympathisers and friends who might be drawn into the movement if ever the community was allowed to function freely.

There were around 700 Baha'i local Baha'i groups across the whole of Iran, but the number apparently fluctuated. In Tehran, there were at least 30,000 "declared Baha'is," including about 4,000 young people. Outside the capital, Baha'is were found in all parts of the country, the largest concentrations being in the provinces of Azerbaijan, Mazandaran and Khurasan in the north, Hamadan in the west, and Fars in the south — all areas linked to early Babi activity. There were several villages in which Baha'is constituted the majority of the population.³⁸ Nationwide, the Baha'i national spiritual assembly estimated that there around two hundred newly declared Baha'is each year, and that the community was growing beyond natural increase. Most of these new Baha'is were young people.³⁹

Baha'is were drawn from all sections of the population, including several members of the Qajar (former royal) family. The Baha'is included both merchants, common labourers, and peasants. It was not possible to specify in what proportions these groups were represented.⁴⁰ There were also many Baha'is drawn from the Zoroastrian and Jewish minorities, who were reported to be attracted towards the movement by its openness to non-Muslim religions and the complete equality within it of people from different

37. Most modern Iranian Baha'is during the 1950s (as now) were of Baha'i descent ('*Bahá'í-zádeh*'), with Baha'i ancestors for several generations. The majority of these forebears would originally have been Shi'i Muslims, but there were also important minorities of Baha'is of Jewish or Zoroastrian ancestry.

38. Berger, "From Sect to Church," p. 126. Berger lists Sayasan ["Sayasan"], Khayrel-Ghora [known as Zirak], and Sangsar [Moojan Momen doubts that Baha'is were ever a majority in Sangsar. Private communication dated 6 August 2017].

39. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 130.

40. Interestingly, there was no mention of Baha'is amongst the semi-nomadic tribal pastoralists, still a significant part of the population in the 1950s.

religious and ethnic backgrounds.⁴¹ Again, there was a substantial number of Baha'í youth, including many young professionals and students. This appeal to youth was attributed to the religion's reputation as a liberal and broad-minded movement, which made it attractive to "a young semi-westernised intelligentsia," but it still had a broad appeal to a diversity of people reflecting the "mass character" of the religion's beginnings.

Despite the prejudice against them, Baha'is enjoyed a reputation for honesty and reliability amongst wider sections of the population. This was good for those involved in business, and, as in other parts of the Middle East such as Egypt, Iraq and Palestine, the Baha'is were successful in business.⁴²

*Legal Status and Persecution*⁴³

The Baha'is remained an unrecognised religious community in Iran. Therefore, they had no rights as a religious minority — unlike Iranian Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians. The Baha'í community had no corporate existence, so that all holdings of land and property were registered in the name of Shoghi Effendi and administered legally as a private estate. The Baha'í national spiritual assembly was not even able to register as a private association, so all its dealings with the government were on an unofficial basis.

In practice, the government allowed the Baha'is to share their teachings with others orally, but did not allow them to print or import any of their literature, so that Baha'í writings, including Scripture were mimeographed for distribution amongst the Baha'is. In addition, some Persian-language literature produced in Egypt and India was smuggled into the country by individual Baha'í travellers.

Iran was a Muslim country in which matters of personal status were subject to religious jurisdiction. Because the Baha'is were legally registered by the religion of their origin (Muslim, Jews, or Zoroastrians), even when they came from families that had been Baha'is or Babis for generations, then they could not marry, inherit, or divorce as Baha'is. This situation was particularly troublesome with regard to marriage: even if bride and groom were both Baha'is, a Baha'í marriage was illegal and in the past had been punished by the imprisonment of both parties. Similarly, any matters concerning inheritance or divorce could not be taken to the courts. Despite these disadvantages, however, the majority of the Baha'is refused to have any dealings with the Muslim religious authorities, preferring to assert the independence of their religion.⁴⁴

41. Unmentioned in the interview, converts were not gained from the Iranian Christian communities (Armenians and Assyrians).

42. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 130.

43. For a recent account of the persecution of the Iranian Baha'is during this period see M. Yazdani, "Towards A History of the Baha'í Community of Iran During the Reign of Mohammad Reza Shah (1941–1979)," *Iran Namag* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2017): lxvi–xcii.

44. The text has the Baha'is "demanding recognition as an independent religion" (Berger, "From Sect to Church," 127).

There was widespread discrimination against the Baha'is in employment, particularly in government service. Previously, many Baha'is had worked for the government, particularly for the post office, but after 1950, the government had issued an employment questionnaire which had a question about religion which had to be answered explicitly. As a result, many Baha'is had been dismissed from government jobs, and no (identified) Baha'is had joined any government agency. Discrimination had been particularly strong in the field of education, with about 300 Baha'i teachers being dismissed in 1952 nationwide.⁴⁵

Direct persecution was much rarer now than it had been in the past, but the Baha'is were still sometimes the victims of physical violence.⁴⁶ There had been two particularly troubling incidents since the Second World War. In the first, (in 1948?), all nine members of the Baha'i spiritual assembly in the city of Yazd, all respectable citizens, were arrested on the charge of murdering a widow who had opposed the Baha'is. During the trial, Muslim mobs roamed the streets demanding the death of the defendants and threatening the judges with death if they did not convict the Baha'is. The courtroom itself was packed with people who kept shouting "Death to the judges!," making it impossible for the accused to speak in their defence. Even the court-appointed lawyer explained that he was ashamed to be representing the Baha'is and only did so as a matter of professional duty. Convicted, and sentenced to death, the nine Baha'is appealed the verdict, but remained in prison up to the time of the interview with Berger.

The second incident was the murder of a Baha'i doctor of Jewish heritage in the city of Kashan.⁴⁷ The seven murderers openly stated that they had killed the man for the glory of Islam, and there were outbreaks of mob violence in their support when they were arrested and brought to trial, with the mob calling for them to be released. At the request of the Baha'i national assembly, the case was transferred to Tehran, but an anti-Baha'i mob again threatened the judges and created disturbances in the courtroom. Finally, the defendants were cleared of the charges, and returned home in a triumphal procession.

Baha'is might protest these cases as breaches of their human rights, but the government gave them little support. Nor did it remove the disadvantages they suffered because of their religion. American Baha'is had made

45. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 127.

46. For an overview of the situation of the Baha'is in the mid-1940s see The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, *The Bahá'í World*, vol. 10, 1944–46 (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1949), 35–48. Moojan Momen provides "A Chronology of Some of the Persecutions of the Babis and Baha'is in Iran, 1844–1978," in The Universal House of Justice. *The Bahá'í World: An International Record*, vol. 18, 1979–83 (Haifa, 1986), 380–92.

47. The victim was Dr. Sulayman Berjis. The murder took place on 3 February 1950. See The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, *Bahá'í World*, vol. 12, 684–85. (According to this account, the assassins were 8 rather than 7 in number.)

representations on behalf of their Iranian coreligionists to both the State Department and the Iranian Embassy in Washington, DC, but to no avail.⁴⁸

Organisation and Activities

The Iranian Baha'is were well organised. Given their legal status, the Baha'í national and local spiritual assemblies took care of many matters that otherwise would be handled by the civil courts. They had apparently succeeded in keeping all disputes between Baha'is away from the civil as well as the official religious courts of the recognised religions. Major disputes between Baha'is were dealt with by the national assembly in Tehran, which assigned one of its committees to adjudicate the matter. There were specialist Baha'í committees to deal with agricultural and commercial issues as well as divorce cases. There was a strong sense of internal discipline within the community which made the jurisdiction of the national assembly highly effective. The Baha'is appeared to accept their own communal authorities and obey their decisions.

The Baha'is also participated energetically in the community's religious and social activities. In Tehran, as many as three thousand Baha'is would sometimes gather at their national headquarters. On one occasion, a Muslim mob threatened to burn the building down, and the police refused to intervene effectively. In response, a cordon of thousands of young Baha'í men formed around the building to defend it.⁴⁹ Large meetings were infrequent, however. The police would not permit them. Instead, there were many places where groups of Baha'is assembled. In Tehran, 125 such "centres" existed, making it possible for relatively small groups of Baha'is to come together with others who all knew each other well. Police interference with Baha'í activity had thus actually strengthened the cohesion of the movement, forcing the Baha'is to operate in small closely knit groups. The traditional extended Persian family structure also added to Baha'í cohesion, with some families numbering as many as two hundred people coming together for Baha'í meetings such as the celebration of New Year. The Baha'is thus constituted a natural community held together by bonds of family, friendship and neighbourhood. They were not an "artificial community."⁵⁰

In the past, there had been over four hundred Baha'í schools across the country, but these had been closed down by the government in 1934.⁵¹ These

48. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 128. Berger got some sense of the antipathy of the Iranian government authorities towards the Baha'is when he telephoned the Iranian consulate in New York to request census figures for the Baha'is and was greeted with open hostility ("From Sect to Church," 143, n88).

49. The dome of the Baha'í centre was destroyed in 1955 with the personal participation of the Army chief of staff and other high-ranking officers. The government also ordered the suppression of the Baha'is, and physical attacks were made on individual Baha'is and Baha'í holy sites in various parts of the country. See The Universal House of Justice, *The Bahá'í World: An International Record*, vol. 13, 1954–63 (Haifa, 1970), 291–96.

50. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 129.

51. Momen disputes that there were ever 400 schools, the actual number probably being around 80, or 100 at most (private communication). The best account of the Baha'í schools in English is Moojan Momen, "Baha'í Schools in Iran," in Brookshaw and Fazel, *The Baha'is of Iran*, 94–121.

included the Tarbiyat secondary school in Tehran which had educated many members of the elite, including the present Shah (Muhammad Reza Shah, reg. 1941–1979) and other members of the royal family. There was still a Baha'i hospital in Tehran at that time which was popular amongst Muslims as well as Baha'is.⁵²

The American Baha'is

Berger was also particularly interested in the development of the Baha'i Faith in the United States — rightly seeing Iran and the USA as both the main centres of Baha'i activity at the time of his study, and the only Baha'i communities of any significant size.⁵³ According to Dr Genevieve Coy (1886–1963), a leading New York Baha'i, and one of Berger's primary informants, there were around 7,000–8,000 Baha'is in the United States by the early 1950s, and by 1950, Baha'i local spiritual assemblies had been established in 172 places.⁵⁴ There were also over two hundred smaller Baha'i groups, and significant evidences of activity, including the dispatch of international American Baha'i pioneers (effectively self-supporting missionaries) and the recent completion of an impressive Baha'i temple (House of Worship) near Chicago.

Berger evidently met a cross-section of American Baha'is, attended meetings, and engaged in discussion with Baha'is he met in various cities. Of particular note, he also undertook what was probably the first sociological survey of a group of Baha'is. The survey was a simple questionnaire which was distributed at a regular meeting of the New York City Baha'is on 8 April 1953 (the "Nineteen Day Feast") with the assistance of Genevieve Coy and the local spiritual assembly.⁵⁵ The questionnaire consisted only of four questions — identification of the respondent's sex, occupation, previous religious affiliation, and what aspects of the Baha'i Faith had first attracted them. The answers were written in time set aside during the Feast, and almost everyone present completed a questionnaire. Berger received ninety papers in all, representing between a third and a half of the total local membership.⁵⁶

The respondents were over 60 per cent female (55 out of 90; 61.1%), which Berger considered normal for contemporary American religious groups. They were predominantly middle-class. Of the 35 males, 23 (65.7%)

52. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 130. All Baha'i medical facilities were confiscated by the state after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. See S. B. Fazel and M. Foadi, "Baha'i Health Initiatives in Iran: A Preliminary Survey," in Brookshaw and Fazel, *The Baha'is of Iran*, 122–40.

53. Up to the 1920s, there had been large and very active Baha'i communities in Russian Central Asia and the Caucasus, but these were forced into inactivity under Soviet rule.

54. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 115.

55. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 131–39. The Nineteen Day Feast is a meeting of Baha'is in a particular locality which combines a devotional, discussion of local Baha'i affairs, and an opportunity to socialise with coreligionists. See Smith, *Concise Encyclopedia*, 158.

56. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 144. There have been a limited number of more recent studies of the social composition and religious backgrounds of Western Baha'is in various countries. These are summarised in P. Smith, "The Baha'I Faith in the West," in *Bahá'is in the West: Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, vol. 14, ed. P. Smith (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2004), 2–60 (see pp. 38–51).

were in business or the professions: 7 in business, 4 in sales or buying, 3 in medicine or chiropractics, 2 in engineering, 3 in art or design, 2 writers or lecturers, and 1 each in teaching and social work. Of the females, 22 (40%) were in similar occupations: 6 teachers, 6 nurses, 3 writers or lecturers, 3 social workers, 2 in art and design, and 2 in business, sales or buying. An additional 20 women were white-collar workers (presumably office staff), as were 2 of the men, and 10 of the women were housewives. There were a small number of people in skilled or unskilled labour (6 men and 3 women). There was also 1 retiree (a man), 2 with no occupation, and 1 unknown. Berger thought that the majority of respondents could be thought of as 'solidly bourgeois', with only a few in occupations which might mark them as members of the 'marginal intelligentsia'.

As to religious backgrounds, the majority were of Christian background. Half (45) of the respondents came from the mainstream Protestant churches: particularly Episcopalians [14], but also Lutherans [8], Methodists [6], Baptists [6], Presbyterians [5], Congregationalists [4], and Reformed [2]. There were also 7 Catholics (7.6% of the total) and 5 individuals from smaller Protestant groups (Christian Science [2], Church of Christ [1], Antioch Christian [1], and Unitarian [1]). There was also one former member of the United Church of Canada. Of those from a non-Christian background, 15 (15.6%) were Jewish, 5 were born into Baha'í families, and 1 was a former Muslim. There were also 6 who had no religious background and 5 whose background was unknown. Several noted that they had been 'truth-seekers' before becoming Baha'ís, but most seemed to have had conventional religious backgrounds. Only two came from churches with a strong Adventist tradition. Berger thought that the large number of respondents of Jewish heritage was a local feature of the New York Baha'ís.

Most of the replies to the question about what aspect of the Baha'í Faith they initially found most attractive focussed on some aspect of the Baha'í teachings, particularly the idea of religious unity and the Baha'í doctrine of progressive revelation, and the belief in world unity and brotherhood (25 each), but also the idea that Baha'í represented a progressive and scientific religion (12) or a new social order (10). Only 12 were attracted because they thought that Baha'í fulfilled Biblical prophecy. Smaller numbers of replies were phrased in terms of religious experience (Baha'í fulfilled their religious needs [10], Baha'í prayers and worship [4], and the example of 'Abdu'l-Baha [3]), or social experience (the example of Baha'í friends [8], fellowship [5], and Baha'í administration [3]).⁵⁷ Several respondents evidently gave multiple answers with a total of 117 items.

It is noticeable, that the reasons why New York Baha'ís were initially attracted to the religion are very varied: which suggests that Baha'í membership was quite diverse in its religious orientation. Berger noted that "most" of his respondents, regardless of their religious background, had already felt

57. Berger, "From Sect to Church," 134–35.

“estranged” from their original faith and were looking for something new to satisfy their religious needs. Several had already changed their religious affiliation one or more times before becoming Baha’is. Another response that Berger noted was that several respondents were impressed with the Baha’i Faith as “an all-inclusive system of ideas within which human experience can be organized.” He was surprised at how few listed Abdu’l-Baha as a factor which had attracted them — the link with Abdu’l-Baha having been such a central aspect of the early growth of the American Baha’i community.⁵⁸

Berger saw the American Baha’is as largely middle class. They were average Americans, and neither “religious virtuosi,” nor very intellectual (Berger felt that American Baha’ism at the time lacked “sufficient depth” to appeal to intellectuals).⁵⁹ Nor did he think that the religion yet showed much sign of potential success. Not only did it lack the vitality to fire great masses of people with enthusiasm, but the “religious market situation” which Western Baha’is faced was presently unfavourable to growth, with strong competition from other religious movements which also sought followers. The Baha’is occupied their own small religious niche, which had become available because of the breakdown of the old concept of Western culture founded on Christianity. Within that niche, they had created their own meaning system largely focused on the idea of building a religiously based new world order, but which also had elements of the gnostic motif: the Baha’is thought of themselves as possessing a secret reality of which those outside the movement were unaware.⁶⁰

As to future research, Berger thought that it would be useful to undertake a detailed comparison of Persian and American Baha’ism. In particular, how was conversion different in the two countries, and how had the Baha’i educational and vocational ethic developed in the East? This would require empirical research in the East, as the secondary literature was as yet insufficient to make valid generalisations.⁶¹

Conclusions

Peter Berger is widely seen as one of the most-influential contemporary sociologists. He wrote extensively on a wide range of topics, including globalisation, modernity and modernisation, pluralism, social change, social conflict, the family, capitalism, political ethics, the sociology of knowledge, and sociological theory. He will perhaps be particularly remembered for his lively

58. Berger, “From Sect to Church,” 134–39.

59. Berger thought that it might become more intellectually sophisticated in the future, but noted what he saw as the present “shallowness” of Baha’i doctrine compared to the depth of (for example) Catholic thought, and to its “crude” meaning system (“From Sect to Church,” [183, 187].

60. Berger noted various ways in which American Baha’is appeared to play “little games of secrecy,” including having closed meetings from which outsiders were excluded, literature marked “for Baha’is only,” and the delight in using long Persian words unintelligible to outsiders (“From Sect to Church,” 187).

61. Berger, “From Sect to Church,” 188.

Introduction to Sociology (1963), and *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), the later co-authored with Thomas Luckmann. He retained a strong and lasting interest in the sociology of religion, with his publications in that field stretching over half-a-century: from *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (1961) to *the Many Altars of Modernity: Towards a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralistic Age* (2014). In this enormous corpus of work, his early study of the Babi and Baha'i religions is relatively insignificant, and he never returned to it in his later work.

Berger's study of the Babi-Baha'i movement was an important (but largely neglected — see below) contribution to the development of Babi and Baha'i Studies, but it is perhaps of wider interest, both biographically, in the light it sheds on his earliest approach to sociology, and for the potential value of his ideas of motif research and the common characteristics of both religious and secular "sects" as meaning systems.

As a work of sociology, Berger's study of the Babi and Baha'i religions is more than merely a historical curiosity — even though at the time it had little impact on the sociology of religion, then focused on other topics and concerns.

Perhaps Berger's most important contribution in this regard is the concept of "motif" as a means of identifying "fundamental patterns" of religious experience and practice. This provides an alternative to the common practice in the sociology of religion of inventing typologies of forms of religious association into which individual religious organisations are then pigeon-holed. Neither well-established religions nor new religious movements are necessarily so easily categorised, however. They are often complex, combining several central concerns which change over time (as in the Babi-Baha'i case). These typologies may well have specific value in addressing particular issues (e.g. the attitude taken by a particular group towards the world), but fail to capture the possible complexity of a religion's concerns or development over the years. By contrast, the motif approach allows us a more dynamic analysis, as well as highlighting the possibly complex nature of a religion's central concerns and the ways in which these concerns interact together: perhaps complementing each other, but also possibly creating internal tensions and contradictions. Motifs also provide a ready basis for comparative studies between religions.

We need not confine ourselves to Berger's own proffered set of motifs, of course, particularly if we are looking beyond the confines of the various styles of Western Christianity that have formed the intellectual matrix for most work in the sociology of religion, but they are a useful starting point: global Pentecostalism and related movements provide a vivid example of Berger's "Enthusiastic" type, for example.⁶² Such studies would be particu-

62. Berger himself later developed a considerable interest in Pentecostalism. For example, see his Afterword in *Global Pentecostalism in the 21st Century*, ed. R. W. Hefner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

larly useful in examining long-lasting religions and religious movements with a complex history (the Society of Friends (Quakers) or Twelver Shi'ism for example), as well as in comparative studies of the varied expressions of a particular motif.⁶³

Berger also contributed to the long-running discussions (they are too poorly structured to be called “debates”) about “churches,” “sects,” and the “routinisation of charisma.” In this context, Berger’s approach is unusual in that it identifies the difference between churches and sects in terms of religious meaning, and posited a fluid relationship between church and sect — with routinisation being the process by which a sect became a church. This avoids the sharp typologisation favoured in much of the literature, which was itself influentially critiqued by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge.⁶⁴ As noted by Michael Hill, Berger’s work here stood at odds with much of the sociological work on sectarianism at the time. Nevertheless, it was much closer to Weber’s original approach, and represented a rare attempt to analyse sectarian phenomena comparatively in terms of the inner meaning of belief systems to their participants rather than any organisational principle, and as such it provided important insights.⁶⁵

Interestingly, Berger’s distinction between church and sect is effectively mirrored by the well-known single attribute definition proposed by Benton Johnson in terms of the acceptance or non-acceptance of the social environment by a religious group (the church accepts, the sect rejects).⁶⁶ This may be easier to operationalise than Berger’s closeness to (sect) or distance from (church) the spirit, but it describes essentially the same phenomena. In either Berger or Johnson’s formulation, the concept of a fluid continuum is more useful as a heuristic device than the various church–sect typologies.

As to Berger’s discussion of pluralism and meaning systems, this is perhaps the least satisfactory of the sociological concerns in his thesis. Indeed, his own later embrace of pluralism undermines the central thrust of his argument, whilst his examination of meaning systems and plausibility structures

63. Although not related to Berger’s work, there have already been comparative studies of “motifs” such as millennialism (C. Wessinger, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) and sainthood (R. Kieckheffer and G. D. Bond, eds., *Sainthood: Its Manifestation in World Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)). There are also numerous studies of the various forms of fundamentalism, which could also be thought of in “motif” terms (e.g. see M. E. Marty and R. S. Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), together with subsequent volumes in “The Fundamentalism Project,” and M. Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

64. R. Stark and W. S. Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

65. M. Hill, *A Sociology of Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 91–94. Hill based his remarks on Berger’s “Sociological Study of Sectarianism” and “Sectarianism and Religious Sociation.”

66. B. Johnson, “A Critical Appraisal of the Church-Sect Typology,” *American Sociological Review* 22, no. 1 (1957): 88–92; B. Johnson, “On Church and Sect,” *American Sociological Review* 28 (1963): 539–49; B. Johnson, “Church and Sect Revisited,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 10 (1971): 124–37.

are much fuller in his later works.⁶⁷ Thus, in conditions of religious freedom, modernity fosters a situation of individual choice and institutionalised pluralism which impacts all religious organisations. This said, these conditions do not of themselves lead to the extreme isolation and Manichean world view which Berger here describes. Meaning systems vary considerably in their “inner dynamic.” Undoubtedly, there are some extremist organisations which are authoritarian and exclusivistic in their meaning systems, but that does not seem to be linked to modernity as such. On the other hand, his suggestion that we consider both “religious” and “secular” sects as having shared qualities as meaning systems is one which may merit further research.

In terms of its place in Babi-Bahá'í Studies, it is to be regretted that Berger's work has as yet had relatively little impact. This lack of impact is partly due to historical circumstances: Berger's thesis appeared at a time when academic Baha'í Studies was essentially non-existent — there was effectively a sixty-year hiatus between its earlier florescence (Browne's major works appeared between 1889 and 1910) and its revival from 1970 onwards. Thus, Berger's work appeared in isolation and there was no scholarly milieu to respond to it.

As to modern Baha'í Studies, whilst this has developed extensively since the 1970s, with a significant quantity of high-quality work being produced, very few of those involved are sociologists, and the field has been dominated by historians (mostly of the Middle East), Islamicists, and theologians. The main exceptions have been the sociological studies by Mike McMullen, Peter Smith, and Margit Warburg.⁶⁸ There are also occasional references in introductions to the sociology of religion and in sociology journals.⁶⁹

In terms of assessing Berger's work in Baha'í Studies, apart from the evident value of his “snapshots” of the Iranian and American Baha'í communities in the early 1950s, the main starting points for further research centre on the usefulness of the motif concept and the routinisation process as a means of characterising and analysing Babi-Baha'í history.

The usefulness of the motif concept has been extensively discussed elsewhere, albeit with significantly recharacterised motifs, and there seems no

67. For a short account of his changes in thinking see P. L. Berger. “Further Thoughts on Religion and Modernity,” *Society* 49, no. 4 (2012): 313–16. The concept of “multirelativity” (the ability of individuals to mentally juggle a number of “relevance structures” simultaneously) is examined in P. Berger, B. Berger, and H. Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974). On religious “plausibility structures” in the modern pluralistic world see P. L. Berger. *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (London: Collins, 1979).

68. Leaving aside their journal articles and introductory books, see in particular M. McMullen. *The Bahá'í: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Smith, *Babi and Baha'í Religions* (1987); and M. Warburg, *Citizens of the World: A History and Sociology of the Baha'is from a Globalization Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

69. See in particular A. Aldridge, *Religion in the Contemporary World: A Sociological Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 7–8, and R. W. Balch, G. Farnsworth, and S. Wilkins, “When the Bombs Drop: Reactions to Disconfirmed Prophecy in a Millennial Sect,” *Sociological Perspectives* 26, no. 2 (1983): 137–58 (a study of an American Baha'í sect).

reason to repeat that discussion here.⁷⁰ We can, however, note that there is much room for further discussion and analysis of individual motifs in a Babi-Baha'i context (to date only millenarianism has been extensively studied).⁷¹

As to the process of routinisation, we should ask if Berger's characterisation of the church-sect polarity is useful in understanding Babi-Baha'i developments. Clearly, there has been a massive shift in the form of overall leadership, with the establishment of the Guardianship of Shoghi Effendi (1922) and later the election of the Universal House of Justice (1963) representing the replacement of the personal charismatic leadership of the earlier period with forms of office charisma, that is, the successful routinisation of authority in Weberian terms. Again, effectively beginning in the 1890s, but accelerating rapidly from the 1920s onwards, organising councils (what are now the elected Local and National Spiritual Assemblies) have been established as the main system of Baha'i administration at the local and national levels — exercising "rational-legal" bureaucratic authority in Weber's terms, and distinctly not a clergy-like body.⁷²

So in Weber's terms, the Baha'i Faith does offer a clear example of routinisation, but does that mean that the Baha'i religion has moved away from "the spirit" towards a church-like accommodation with the world as Berger's model would have us suppose? This is not an easy question to answer, both because of the complexities of some Baha'i beliefs and practices, and the varying socio-political environments under which Baha'is live.

70. See Smith, *Babi and Baha'i Religions*, 2–3, 31–47, 72–85, 107, 112, 136–56. Briefly, it is argued there that eight separate motifs have played some role in the complex developments of Babi-Baha'i history — some of greater importance than others. The most prevalent has been the regard for authoritative religiously sanctioned leadership. Other significant motifs have been the desire to structure society according to the provisions of a system of holy law (legalism) and millenarianism, although the millenarian motif came to be increasingly "secularised" as social reformism. Both Babis and Baha'is shared a belief in the holiness of martyrdom in service to their religion, and allied to this many Babis also held traditional Islamic ideas about the importance of holy war as a form of sacrificial struggle. By contrast, however, the whole notion of holy war was utterly rejected by the Baha'i leaders. As to a supposed gnostic motif, whilst Babism emerged as an expression of Islamic esotericism, and some of the early Western Baha'is belonged to the "cultic milieu" of their day, the Baha'i Faith has been largely devoid of a strong esoteric element, inclining instead towards a common-sense rationalism. There is also a strong universalistic motif in Bahaism.

71. See P. Smith, "Millenarianism in the Babi and Baha'i Religions," in *Millennialism and Charisma*, ed. R. Wallis (Belfast: Queen's University, 1982), 231–83; P. Smith and W. Collins, "Babi and Baha'i Millennialism," in Wenger, *Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, 474–91.

72. On Baha'i administration and the assembly system see Smith, *Concise Encyclopedia*, 24–28, 49–51. The only clergy-like figures to emerge in Baha'i history were the major teachers of the Faith who operated in Iran and neighbouring countries in the period prior to the establishment of the assembly system (some of them trained as Shi'i clerics) and those individuals who served as "Hands of the Cause," particularly in the 1951–1963 period. The Hands were all appointed for life, and charged to "promote learning" and "edify the souls of men." By contrast, the Continental Boards of Counsellors, who took over some of the functions of the Hands from 1968 onwards, together with the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, are only appointed for a specific time period and, whilst working to enthuse the Baha'is, are not meant to encroach on the administrative authority of the assemblies (Smith, *Concise Encyclopedia*, 51, 52, 112, 175–77; Smith, *Babi and Baha'i Religions*, 128–32).

In terms of Baha'i attitudes towards the wider world, the overall stance might be described as "critical accommodation," that is, "moderately" rather than extremely sect-like on Berger's continuum. Thus, on the one hand, from the time of Baha'u'llah onwards, Baha'is have stressed their loyalty to established governments and prohibited seditious behaviour. They have also rejected ideas of religious prejudice, intolerance, and separation, and advocated cooperation with like-minded outsiders. At the same time, however, they have strongly criticised what they see as the materialism and immorality of existing societies and institutions, looked forward to the present "old world order" being swept away and replaced by a new one, and have been verbally hostile to the Shi'i clergy in Iran who they blame for their persecution there. This said, the practical response of the Baha'is to what they regard as a very imperfect world has focused on the advocacy and increasingly practice of social reformism in areas such as education, the advancement of women, medical care, and inter-racial and inter-religious cooperation. In this vein, the "Baha'i International Community" seeks to work closely with UN and other agencies and Baha'is often engage with government and voluntary agencies which they see as sympathetic to Baha'i ideals.⁷³ It is of note that there is substantial historical continuity in these attitudes despite the routinisation of leadership and organisation: although amplified and in some cases expanded by Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, most key Baha'i beliefs were clearly delineated by Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha.

Again, in terms of individual and community practice, the Baha'is have not sought to distance themselves from wider society — there are no Baha'i communes or bans on inter-marriage with those of other faiths. Baha'is have their own religious laws regarding matters such as prayer and fasting, but they also follow the civil law of the country in which they reside, and do not have distinctive diets or forms of dress and appearance which would set themselves off from others.⁷⁴ In some respects, they are likely to be socially liberal — for example, reflecting their own teachings, they are likely to be opposed to racism and sexism. At the same time, they tend to be morally conservative, both with regard to drug use and sexual behaviour, including official opposition towards homosexuality.⁷⁵ The social exclusion of the tiny minority of Baha'is who have rejected the official leadership succession also shows the limitations on Baha'i liberalism.⁷⁶

Lacking in Berger's account of church and sect here is a proper consideration of the socio-political environments in which religious movements are

73. On the Baha'i International Community see Smith, *Concise Encyclopedia*, 69. On Baha'i social involvement in general see Smith, *Introduction*, 201–7.

74. On Baha'i community life and membership see Smith, *Introduction*, 157–74.

75. On the Baha'i attitude towards homosexuality see Smith, *Concise Encyclopedia*, 184–85.

76. Those who regard themselves as Baha'is but reject the leadership of Abdu'l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi or the Universal House of Justice are termed "Covenant-breakers," and are excluded from the Baha'i community and socially ostracised. See Smith, *Concise Encyclopedia*, 114–16.

located.⁷⁷ This is particularly relevant to any study of the Baha'is, given that they have long been a genuinely international religion and as such have experienced a great diversity of socio-political environments. Thus, the "sectarianism" of Bahaism in Iran is probably more a reflection of a long history of religious persecution and antipathy by a variety of state authorities than of the attitudes and practices of the Baha'is themselves: it has been the state and religious authorities which have sought to exclude the Baha'is from society, not the Baha'is themselves. By contrast, in societies where the Baha'is have been free to practice their religion, their "critical accommodationism" has been evident, with attempts to gain official recognition as a religious community and engagement with socially reformist causes.

Two recent papers dealing with routinisation in a Baha'i context should also be mentioned. In the first, by Lynn Echevarria, routinisation in the Canadian Baha'i community particularly involved the historical development and growth of the Baha'i "administrative order." This provided the Baha'is with forms of non-clerical local leadership which were seen as imbued with spiritual principles by Baha'u'llah and which thus preserved the religion's original spirit. In the Baha'i case, she felt, this also ensured that rank-and-file Baha'is came to take responsibility for the progress of their Faith, and were not "passengers" dependent on others for leadership. Despite being hard to develop, the administration both ensured that local communities functioned more effectively and helped empower Baha'i women — so that gender equality in Bahai work became a practical reality rather than merely a theoretical principle.⁷⁸

The second, by Farida Fozdar, stressed that routinisation has occurred at an ideational as well as an organisational level. Thus, the earlier formalisation of the structures of Baha'i leadership and organisation has recently been augmented by the "Ruhi Program" of Baha'i instruction, widely adopted by the Baha'is since the 1990s, and acting as a form of ideational routinisation through the systematisation of structures of study and practice, and leading she believes to a greater uniformity of belief across a globalised religious community.⁷⁹

The work of Echevarria and Fozdar suggests that issues relating to the nature and extent of routinisation are still of current interest and can be usefully pursued in further research.

77. This may be a general problem with the church-sect approach to religious movements and its tendency to focus on the internal dynamics of sectarianism over environmental factors. The "resource mobilisation" approach in social movement theory provides an alternative. For a so-far isolated attempt to analyse Babism in these terms see P. Smith and M. Momen, "The Babi Movement: A Resource Mobilization Perspective," in *In Iran*, ed. P. Smith (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1986), 33–93.

78. L. Echevarria, "How Routinization Became a Saving Grace for the Baha'is," *Journal of Religious History* 36 (2012): 528–41.

79. F. Fozdar, "The Baha'i Faith: A Case Study in Globalization, Mobility and the Routinization of Charisma," *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 28, no. 3 (2015): 274–92. For the wider historical context in which the Ruhi programme developed see R. Stockman, *The Baha'i Faith: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 191–208.

In conclusion, Berger can be said to have begun the sociological study of the Babi and Baha'i movements, but that project can certainly be extended further. Not only is there considerable scope for the further application of Berger's own insights in Babi and Baha'i Studies, but other sociological approaches and questions can be pursued, including the application of social movement theory, the study of religion and the state, social class and power, globalisation, conversion and disaffiliation studies, myth and reality construction, gender studies, the impact of comparative work ethics, and ritual and culture. Given that the Baha'i religion has now achieved a global presence, there is also a need for more local studies. There may be certain commonalities across the whole "Baha'i world," but there must also be assumed to be considerable diversity between the various local and national communities, and these have been scarcely examined.⁸⁰

80. For a provisional list (dated 2 May 2014) of studies in different countries see P. Smith, "Some Studies of Baha'i Communities," <https://icpetermahidol.wordpress.com/2014/05/02/some-studies-of-bahai-communities-a-provisional-list/>.