



Riphah Journal of Islamic Thought & Civilization

Published by: Department of Islamic Studies,

Riphah International University, Islamabad

Email: editor.rjtc@riphah.edu.pk

Website: <https://journals.riphah.edu.pk/index.php/jitc>

ISSN (E): 3006-9041 (P): 2791-187X



Rereading Peter L. Berger's Social Constructs on the Fragmentation of Digital Religious Authority

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Abstract

This paper reviews Peter L. Berger's social construction in the context of the fragmentation of religious authority in digital era. Berger emphasized that social reality is the result of human construction through the process of externalization, objectification, and internalization. Externalization in which humans express themselves and create a social world through daily activities. Objectivity is a social product of human beings to be an objective reality that is recognized by all, such as norms, laws, religions. Meanwhile, internalization is the process of reabsorbing the objective reality into consciousness, so that it is considered natural and taken for granted. However, in the digital era, this process is disrupted because religious authorities are no longer single and stable, but are fragmented by discourse competition between traditional clerics, the state, academics, and digital actors. This fragmentation shows that the legitimacy of authority is not solely determined by religious institutions, but also by the logic of media, symbolic capital, and virtual interaction. This paper proposes a critique

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64768/rjtc.v4i1.2858>

that the social construction of religious authority in Indonesia is not sufficiently understood in a classical framework that presupposes the stability of meaning but needs to be approached through the dynamics of digital contestation and identity politics. This article emphasizes the importance of reconstructing Berger's theory to be relevant to explain the changes in religious authority in an increasingly plural and digitized society.

Keywords: Social Construction Theory, Religious Authority, Digital Religion, Peter L. Berger, Fragmentation of Authority.

1. Introduction:

In traditional religious authorities such as Islamic boarding schools, established Islamic organizations, charismatic clerics are increasingly questioned due to the emergence of new authorities in the digital space. This happens because of the change in the socio-religious terrain to the digital space which then gives rise to fragmented authority, even competing. This raises the author's anxiety about whether Berger's theory, which was born in the modern Western context, is still relevant for re-reading religious phenomena in Indonesia which have a base of tradition, local culture, as well as global influence.¹

Berger's theory of social construction posits that society is a product of humans, and that individuals construct their reality through shared beliefs and symbols. In the Indonesian context, where authority is deeply rooted in cultural and historical traditions, Berger's theory can provide valuable insights into how power structures are created and maintained. Religious authorities in Indonesia have a complex interplay between

¹ R. Wuthnow, "Cultural Analysis: The Work of Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas," *Cultural Analysis the Work of Peter L Berger Mary Douglas Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas*, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203092774>.

traditional beliefs and modern influences. The role of Islam has been a major focus of this study, as Indonesia is home to the largest Muslim population in the world.¹

Scholars have examined how Islamic teachings and practices intersect with political forces, social norms, and cultural traditions in shaping the country's religious landscape. In addition, the emergence of religious extremism and the government's response to it has also become an aspect of research. On the other hand, the changing socio-religious landscape in the digital era presents new problems in understanding authority. If in traditional societies religious authorities tend to be cantered on formal institutions such as ulama, Islamic boarding schools, or state religious institutions, then now religious legitimacy is increasingly fragmented by the emergence of alternative authorities in the digital space such as: social media ustaz, celebrity dai, to algorithms that determine the flow of religious discourse. This phenomenon shows that religious authority is no longer a singular entity, but the result of a symbolic contestation that is constantly negotiated.²

It is in this context that Peter L. Berger's idea of social construction becomes relevant to be re-read and even criticized. Berger emphasizes that social reality is the result of a dialectic of externalization, objectification, and internalization. However, this framework was born out of a relatively stable modern society. The digital world displays instability, acceleration, and fragmentation of meaning. Religious authority that was once seen as taken for granted is now being reproduced in a virtual space full of market logic, symbolic capital, and democratization of access to information. Therefore, critically rereading Berger means placing social constructs no longer in the framework of the stability of meaning, but rather in the dynamics of digital disruption that

¹ F. Lombardo, "Dark and the Social Construction of Knowledge," in *Societies*, 154/4 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.3917/soc.154.0021>.

² M. Heide, "On Berger: If Peter Berger Was Doing Public Relations - A Social Constructionist Perspective on Crisis Communication," *Public Relations and Social Theory Key Figures Concepts and Developments*, (2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315271231>.

challenge traditional claims of authority. This paper wants to emphasize that the fragmentation of digital religious authority is a symptom of a new social construction that requires an interdisciplinary understanding: between the sociology of knowledge, digital anthropology, and the theory of religious authority.¹

The main problem that arises in the fragmentation of digital religious authority is the loss of a single centre of legitimacy. In the Indonesian Islamic tradition, for example, religious authority has been held by ulama, Islamic boarding schools, and large organizations such as NU or Muhammadiyah. However, the digital era has given rise to a new reality, anyone with access to technology, communication skills, and a large number of followers can appear as a religious authority without going through traditional channels. This phenomenon not only shifts the distribution of authority but also causes an epistemological crisis.²

Peter L. Berger's framework, particularly in the book *The Social Construction of Reality*, helps explain how religious authority is formed, legitimized, and internalized in society. However, problems arise when Berger's theory is applied to the digital context. Where the externalization of religious teachings is no longer linear, the objectification of religious reality takes place in a machine-determined algorithmic space, and internalization is not simply through tradition, but through brief interactions on social media. In other words, digitalization has radicalized the process of social construction so that religious authority is not only distributed, but also extremely fragmented.³

¹ B. Barnes, "On The Social Construction of Reality: Reflections on a Missed Opportunity," in *Human Studies*, 39/1 (2016). 1, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-016-9389-1>.

² M. Endre, "On the Very Idea of Social Construction: Deconstructing Searle's and Hacking's Critical Reflections," *Human Studies*, 39/1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-016-9395-3>.

³ R. Bickel, "Peter Berger on Modernization and Modernity: An Unvarnished Overview," *Peter Berger on Modernization and Modernity an Unvarnished Overview*, (2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315111391>.

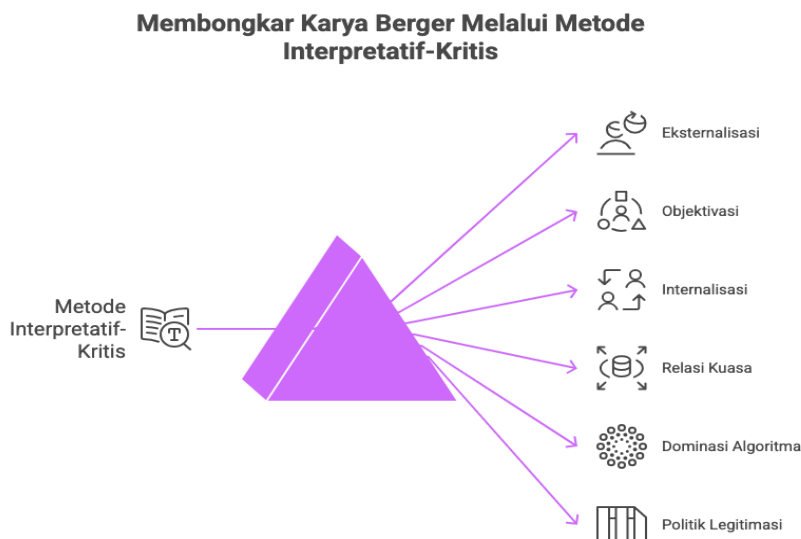
From this description, this problematization becomes even clearer when we look at how digital authority often collides with institutional authority. For example, the official MUI fatwa can be questioned or even ignored by the digital public when a religious influencer with millions of followers proposes a different interpretation. The authority of traditional scholars who rely on scientific sanad and the legitimacy of the pesantren community must deal with instant authority formed by virality. As a result, the fragmentation of religious authority is not only a sociological problem, but also contains political, economic, and even technological dimensions. From this it appears that a rereading of Berger's social construct demands a more critical approach. The classical theory of meaning stability must be expanded to answer the context of digital disruption. The fragmentation of digital religious authority is not only a shift in the source of legitimacy but also touches on the fundamental problem of how religion is constructed, disseminated, and lived in an increasingly plural, digitized, and algorithmic society.

2. Methodology:

This paper uses an interpretive-critical method of texts related to Berger's works. As for Berger's works, the author focuses on two of his works, namely: *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* which he co-authored with Thomas

Luckmann in 1971. Then in addition is a work entitled *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. 1966. The interpretive method is used because the social reality of religious authority is seen as a construction born from symbolic interaction, in accordance with Peter L. Berger's framework, namely externalization, objectification, internalization. Meanwhile, it is critical because this paper not only describes the fragmentation of authority, but also questions power

relations, algorithm dominance, and the politics of legitimacy in the digital space. This interpretive-critical method of Berger's text is used to understand the text not only literally, but also to reveal the hidden meaning, power relations, ideology, and socio-historical context behind the text. In the text, there is a surplus *of meaning* that is always open to various interpretations.¹ To simplify the method that the author uses, here is the logical structure.



3. Discussion:

3.1 Berger's Social Construction Triad:

Berger's social construction is essentially a critique of bridging the approach offered by Durkheim², Weber³, Marx⁴ and then continuing Karl Mannheim's way of

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*(Texas: Christian University Press, 1976), 70-80.

² Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*(New York: The Free Press, 1982).

³ Christopher Adair-Totteff, *Marx Weber's Sociology of Religion*(Germany: Tübingen, 2016).

thinking.¹ To bridge Durkheim's thinking which emphasizes on objective social facts. Weber emphasizes a subjective understanding (*verstehen*)² of social action. Marx emphasized economic structure as the basis of social reality. To bridge his predecessors, Berger shows that social reality is not entirely objective or subjective, but rather the result of a dialectic of the three.

From the dialectic of the three, Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote a book entitled *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. From this work, the author will then rely on the discussion related to social construction which then not only reconveys what Berger discussed, but the author will criticize and test it on the reality of the present. Berger in his thesis said that: “social reality is created, institutionalized, and inherited through human interaction.” Because social reality is a human production, as Berger says: “reality and knowledge are products of social interaction, not absolute givens. Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product.” In the sense that reality does not just exist but is formed through human interaction. What we consider real is the result of a socially *constructed agreement*.³

Simply put, Berger's thought, which the author later called the term *triadic of social construction*, is a dialectical process of *externalization, objectification, internalization*. Humans at the stage of externalization express themselves and create a

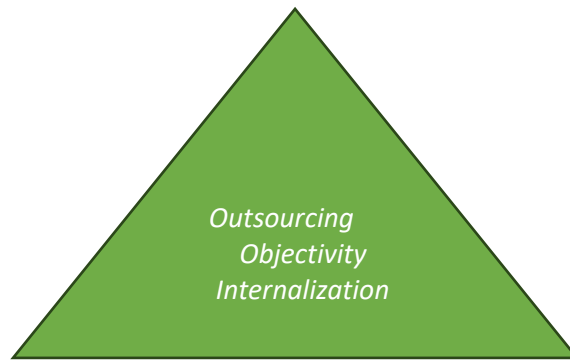
⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume II The Process of Circulation of Capital*, translated by I. Lasker (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1956).

¹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1929).

² Max Weber introduced the term *verstehen* as a method in the social sciences, particularly sociology, for understanding human social action. In contrast to natural science which explains phenomena with the law of cause and effect (*erklären*), social science must understand the subjective meaning underlying human actions. Human actions are not only from the outside (*objective behaviour*), but also from the inner world, motives, and accompanying meanings.

³ Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Published in Penguin University Books 1971), 61.

social world (law, customs, religion). Then objectification becomes an institution that seems objective and coercive. And at the internalization stage, the individual accepts, interprets, and makes the social rules part of him. It is at this stage that repeated human actions will form (*habitus*). The custom is then institutionalized into an institution, which is then passed on to the next generation as something considered natural.¹



Triadic of Social Construction

The triadic model of social construction is based on the author's findings and analysis.

From this dialectical process, in the end, human beings need social legitimacy so that institutions survive.² In this case, religion is the highest form of legitimacy because it gives a transcendent meaning to the social order. Even for Berger, he mentions "*Religion as a Sacred Canopy*" in the sense that *religion provides a sacred canopy over society, giving ultimate meaning and order to human existence*. To maintain this legitimacy, humans also need language to be an important means of maintaining social construction because it allows the creation, spread, and maintenance of meaning.

¹ Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 70–75.

² Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 92-104.

Therefore, it takes social mechanisms (ideological, religious, educational, media) to constantly convince that reality is legitimate and true.¹

3.2 Vis a Vis the Fragmentation of Traditional and Digital Religious Authority:

Religious authority has long been a pillar in maintaining the continuity of traditions, legitimacy, and religious practices of the people. In traditional societies, authority is usually centralized in the form of ulama, kiai, or formal religious institutions that are socially and culturally recognized. However, the presence of the digital era presents the phenomenon of *authority disruption* where religious interpretations can now be produced, disseminated, and consumed through virtual space without going through traditional legitimacy mechanisms. This *vis-à-vis meeting* between traditional and digital authorities gives birth to complex fragmentation dynamics: the struggle for authority space, changes in the pattern of legitimacy, as well as a shift in the way religious societies operate.²

If traditional authorities emphasize sanad, interpretation of the book, and institutionality. While digital authority emphasizes performativity, popular rhetoric, visualization, and proximity to the audience. The Vis a Vis between traditional and digital authorities is seen as a tension in public debates on social media, for example related to halal-haram fatwas, identity politics, and Islamic lifestyles. Here, fragmentation not only creates plurality, but also has the potential to give birth to polarization.³

¹ Peter L Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Openroad Integrated Media, 1966), 25–29.

² J. Dreher, "Peter L. Berger's the Social Construction of Reality," in *Anthem Companion to Peter Berger*, (2023), <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.168327.12>.

³ P. A. Mellor, "Modernity, Self-Identity and the Sequestration of Death," in *Sociology*, 27/3 (1993), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038593027003005>.

Berger states that modernity gives birth to pluralism which has an impact on the delegitimization of a single authority. This pluralism ultimately triggers the fragmentation of religious authority that is no longer centralized, but *rather competing in the religious marketplace*. Traditional Authority still claims legitimacy through *continuity* (tradition, sanad, institutions). Digital Authority comes with *novelty* (communicative style, popular narrative, quick accessibility).

The two are in a *Vis a Vis position* not only to face each other, but also to negate each other and sometimes take advantage of each other. For example, traditional kyai began using digital platforms to maintain their authority, while *religious influencers* used traditional imagery to gain legitimacy. In Berger's framework, this phenomenon suggests that the digital religious reality is a new social construct that shifts the old mechanisms of authority. Therefore, the sacred canopy is weakened because religious authority is now contested, not monopolized. Religious authority turned into a competitive arena like a free market, where the people acted as religious consumers. Authority became fragmented, but it was also more democratic because many voices were accessible. However, the risk of misinformation and banality increases.

3.3 Rereading Berger's Social Constructs in the Digital Age:

If used as it is, Berger's frame of mind in the digital context no longer has a space, because the context and the times are different. Therefore, it needs a critical re-reading to find its relevance into the digital world. This re-reading is a construction from the author as a discussion material in this paper, so as not to seem normative or even a repetition of Berger's thoughts. Therefore, it is necessary to re-read it so that it is fresher and finds its relevance.

In the classical context, this idea asserts that society and individuals create and influence each other, with institutions, symbols, and language being the medium of

affirming reality. However, entering the digital age, especially in the midst of the flow of social media, artificial intelligence, and platform algorithms, Berger's framework needs to be re-read. Digitalization presents new forms of reality construction that are more fluid, fast, and even destabilize traditional authority.

The rereading that the author intends is to bring Berger's thinking to digital habitus. Here is Berger's triad of social construction on the digital space. *Externalization*: the expression of authority is now not only live lectures, but also digital content (videos, memes, da'wah pieces, podcasts). *Objectification*: authority is no longer institutionalized only through formal institutions, but through digital metrics (number of likes, shares, followers). *Internalization*: audiences internalize authority through fast, instant, and emotional digital content consumption patterns, different from traditional internalization based on long education in Islamic boarding schools.

For the author, Berger's theory of social construction does not anticipate how digital technologies and algorithms can become dominant actors in shaping social reality. Berger talks a lot about traditional social institutions, but now epistemic power is shifting to global digital corporations. Google, Meta, or X function as the authority of reality, replacing some functions of the state or religion. Berger emphasizes a gradual process, while the digital era shows a massive and viral acceleration of the construction of reality. Facts can be formed and destroyed in a matter of hours.

As a result of the rereading of social construction, Berger needs to be expanded to the realm of digital social construction where externalization is no longer neutral, but is mediated by technological infrastructure, big data, and algorithms. If in the classical framework social reality tends to be single and stable, we now live in *echo chambers* that give birth to parallel reality. Thus, social construction in the digital era is *afragmented* construction. Rereading Berger means acknowledging that the authority of

reality is not only held by religion, state, or family, but also by digital platforms that act as *gatekeepers* of knowledge and meaning.

4. Conclusion:

A rereading of Peter L. Berger's social construct in the context of the fragmentation of digital religious authority confirms that classical theories of externalization, objectification, and internalization require critical and in-depth reading, as *the regimes of truth* and *habitus* are different. If Berger emphasizes traditional social institutions such as religion, family, and the state as pillars of the legitimacy of reality, then the digital era shows the division of authority where religious meaning is no longer monopolized by clerics, formal institutions, or mass organizations, but is also produced by *influencers*, *content* creators, and platform algorithms. This fragmentation produces two critical consequences. *First*, religious authority has become increasingly fluid and distributed, so that religious people live in a diversity of interpretations that are not always bound by traditional authorities. *Second*, the mechanism of constructing religious reality in the digital space is determined more by the logic of popularity and virality than by epistemic authenticity or scientific authority. In Berger's framework, this means that the objectification of religious reality is now under the hegemony of platform technology and the attention economy, rather than solely on established social legitimacy. Therefore, criticism of Berger's thought in this context does not stop at adaptation but rather leads to the expansion of the paradigm. Social construction in the digital era is not only the relationship between humans and humans, but also the relationship between humans and machines, algorithms, and global technological infrastructure. This is a challenge as well as an opportunity, how social theory can continue to survive, when religious authority, meaning, and truth are now constructed in a fragmented, instantaneous, and no longer linear network.

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