CHAPTER TWO

A brief explanation of the Berger and Luckmann's theory that will be used in this thesis.

2.1 Introduction

The intention of this chapter is twofold. First, to discuss briefly Berger and Luckmann's (1966) phenomenological approach to the sociology of knowledge, especially their conception of the symbolic universe and how this serves to explain and justify the social reality within which people find themselves. Although this is an old theory and not the only one available, it is useful and still provides a basic and valid tool for describing and analysing the material relevant to this study.

Second, following Berger and Luckmann's approach, we will investigate the symbolic universe of 1 John, bearing in mind the fact that any attempt to reconstruct the socio-historical scenario of the first century readers must remain hypothetical since we can not with certainty purport to have accurately done so. The intention of this investigation would be to discover how the symbolic universe of 1 John influenced the manner the author expressed himself, and what symbols he used in communicating his message, and whether those symbols still provide relevant communication today.

There is also a tendency among scholars to make statements that are not based on any research findings. It is therefore our intention to conduct a field

study on some aspects of Zulu culture, which we hope will furnish information relevant for today.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Berger and Luckmann's conception of the symbolic universe

We have already stated that this study will be based on some aspects of Berger and Luckmann's well-known phenomenological approach to the sociology of knowledge, and in particular their conception of symbolic universes. However, there will be no constant referral to them since it has been mentioned that what follows are insights based on their theory. It is stated that the symbolic universe constitutes the highest level of legitimation of the social reality that human beings create (Berger & Luckmann 1966:95).

The authors ascribe the origin of institutions to frequently repeated actions, which become cast into a pattern. The process by which actions are patterned and frequently repeated until their performers apprehend them is called habitualization. In other words institutionalisation occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualised actions by the types of actors (Berger & Luckmann 1966:54).

By means of role-playing institutions become embodied in individual experience. As individuals play their roles, they participate in a social reality, a reality that must be made meaningful and subjectively plausible to all its members. The process by which this is achieved is called legitimation.

Through this process reality is explained and justified. Legitimation produces and integrates the meanings that are already attached to institutions.

The need for legitimation arises whenever the already objectified meanings of the institutional order have to be transmitted to a new generation. It is at this point, when institutions can no longer be maintained by means of the individual's own recollection and habitualization, that the unity of history gets broken. Legitimation restores the broken link by 'explaining' and 'justifying'. It explains by ascribing cognitive validity to the institutional order and it justifies by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives. Legitimation not only tells the person why he should perform one action and not the other, it also tells him why things are what they are (1966:94), i.e. it supplies the person with knowledge. Berger and Luckmann point out that there are different levels of legitimation; namely:

The first level is called incipient legitimation. This level is pre-theoretical, that is, when the simple traditional affirmations to the effect that, 'This is how things are done' are operative.

The theoretical level constitutes the second level, which contains theoretical propositions in a rudimentary form. Here may be included such things as proverbs, sayings, folk tales, stories that are used to explain reality.

The third level contains explicit theories by which the institutional order is legitimated in terms of a differentiated body of knowledge. Because of the specialised nature of this form of knowledge, it is always entrusted to

specialised personnel who transmit it through formalised initiation procedures (Berger and Luckmann 1966:95).

The fourth level is the symbolic universe, which according to the authors constitutes the highest level of legitimation. It is this level which we will discuss briefly since in our research we will be using insights based on it.

2.2.1.1 Symbolic universe

It should be noted that our intention here is not to develop a theory but to give a brief orientation on the method we are partly going to be using. Detailed information for anyone who wants to read more about this theory is available in Berger and Luckmann's book, 'The Social Construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge'. What is a symbolic universe? Berger and Luckmann (1966:95) define a symbolic universe as a body of theoretical traditions that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality.

This level of legitimation is distinguished from preceding ones by its scope of meaningful integration. The symbolic universe encompasses marginal situations, which are experienced in dreams and fantasies as provinces of meaning detached from everyday life, endowed with peculiar reality of their own. These marginal experiences are integrated within a meaningful totality that 'explains and justifies them'.

The operation of symbolic universes is nomic i.e. ordering, in character. It provides order for the subjective apprehension of biographical experience.

Experiences belonging to different spheres (such as dreams) are integrated by incorporation in the same, overarching universe of meanings. The nomic function of the symbolic universe for individual experience may be described quite simply by saying 'it puts everything in its right place' (Berger & Luckmann 1966:98). When one strays, the symbolic universe allows one to return to reality.

The symbolic universe apart from integrating marginal realities provides the highest level of integration for the discrepant meaning actualised within everyday life in society. The symbolic universe orders and legitimates everyday roles, priorities, and operating procedures by placing them in the context of the most general frame of reference conceivable (sub specie universe). As Joubert (1995:50) points out, even the precariousness of the world is overcome within the symbolic universe.

The same legitimating function pertains to the 'correctness' of the individual's subjective identity. Placing it within the context of a symbolic universe ultimately legitimates identity. The individual can live in society with some assurance that she/he really is what she/he considers him/herself to be as he plays his routine social roles, in broad daylight and under the eyes of significant others.

The symbolic universe also provides psychological reinforcement in the face of a crisis such as death, illness, or in times of uncertainty and heightened anxiety. It is to one's conceptual system that one turns for refuge and encouragement. For instance, death, which is terrifying, is integrated within the reality of social existence. Its terrifying aspect, which may be paralysing

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to the extreme to the individual person is removed. The symbolic universe tends to integrate and reinforce death, and each of the situations mentioned above, either through rituals or ceremonies. For instance, when someone has died, people tend to ritualise their grief in a variety of ways. The ritualisation of grief is important for their healing and well-being. In that way the individual is able to face death and make sense of it.

The symbolic universe therefore shelters the individual from ultimate terror and from a world that appears to be filled with capricious and uncontrollable forces by bestowing ultimate legitimation upon the protective structures of the institutional order. In this way the precariousness of the world is overcome (Joubert 1995:50). Berger and Luckmann (1966:102) call symbolic universes sheltering canopies because of their ability to absorb, integrate and order reality.

2.2.1.2 The role of language

Berger and Luckmann (1966:36-7) define language as the most important sign system of human society originating in the face-to-face situation. Common experiences of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic signification. As these authors contend, life is life because there exists a common language, which I share with other people. Through language people are able to define and express in words the reality, as they perceive it. It must be stated that language operates according to its own rules, which must be adhered to. One cannot take rules applicable to one language and use them to the other. Language has the capacity of bridging different zones

within the reality of everyday life and integrating them into a meaningful whole (Berger & Luckmann 1966:39).

Furthermore language is able to construct immense symbolic representations that tower over the reality of everyday life (Berger & Luckmann 1967:40). Symbolic language attempts to reach out to that which is not immediately known. It operates for this task by taking images derived from the world of every day, i.e. the world of sense experience, and using them to speak of that which transcends them. Therefore, an understanding of language is essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life (Berger and Luckmann 1966:37).

2.2.1.3 The maintenance of symbolic universes

Having discussed the symbolic universe, it is necessity that we discuss how symbolic universes maintain themselves since 1 John exhibits some of these techniques. Berger and Luckmann (1966:105) state that specific procedures of universe maintenance become necessary when the symbolic universe has become a problem. A problem arises whenever the symbolic universe has to be transmitted to another generation. As a matter of fact the symbolic universe is imposed upon the young of any society by means of familiar teaching and learning and in some cases through initiation. What this means is that people who have been brought up within a particular cultural context will be conditioned to interpret reality in terms of the conceptual systems of that culture. If women are reared within a culture where no status or respect of any kind is accorded them, they will simply accept that unquestioningly and uncomplainingly and will see nothing wrong with that.

The problem becomes accentuated for the symbolic universe if there has arisen a deviant version of the symbolic universe with a substantial number of subscribers, which challenges the reality status of the symbolic universe as originally constituted (Berger and Luckmann 1966:106). The encounter and interaction between two societies with conflicting universes, marked by strenuous resistance from both sides, may results in a dynamic interaction and forced adaptation as each challenges and impacts on the other. Such confrontation may either result in the rejection and replacement of the symbolic universe or its confirmation.

The usefulness and relevancy of Berger and Luckmann's theory for this dissertation lies in the fact it provides a basic and valid tool for analysing the material pertaining to both the Zulu world and that of 1 John. Since all human experiences should be conceived as taking place within the symbolic universes, it is our intention first, to identify, and describe with the help of this theory, symbols in 1 John. Second, in chapter four, a description of what the relationship between these symbols is, will be done. In the ensuing chapter an attempt through a discourse analysis of 1 John will be made in order to identify some of the symbols that the author employed in communicating his understanding of the Gospel message to his community. We are aware that a discourse analysis is an old method with difficiencies of its own but we have chosen it because for the purpose of this research it is still effective. The nature of our research requires that one focuses as far as possible on every detail. The discourse analysis is the right method to help us focus on every aspect in the text as well as illustrating what the relationship is among these aspects.