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GEORGE PEPPER

Peter Berger: Modernization and Religion

1

Peter Berger combines two different methodologies in his study of modernization: the analytical he draws from Max Weber and the phenomenological from Alfred Schutz. He uses the analytical to explain the characteristics of the major institutions found in modernized societies, preeminently bureaucracy and technological production; he employs the phenomenological to bring to awareness the content and style of human consciousness under the pervasive influence of those institutions.

Each methodology has its own criteria of validation. Factual evidence and logical consistency measure his analytical approach. His phenomenological approach, however, rests on its persuasiveness for self-understanding. For the positivist, such a criterion is tenuous, since it cannot appeal to any indisputable fact or flawless logical demonstration. Others will be readier to defend it on the grounds that scientific methods and theories do not encompass all spheres of meaning. Personal motives for engaging in science cannot be made fully intelligible by science. Nor does appeal to facts and scientific logic explain how a poet thinks in terms of images, a writer of fiction in terms of character development and plot, a painter in terms of color and line, a musician in terms of sounds. Artistic work falls outside urbanization.

Because economic forces are the more compelling in social organization, Berger finds the primary carrier of technological production to be of major importance for shaping modern consciousness. Not all of its features, however, are transferable, i.e., able to become secondary carriers. Bureaucracy, the other primary carrier, in contrast, has readily transferable implications for modern consciousness (1974 113–15). But Berger insists that no monocausal relationship holds between the primary carriers and consciousness; the causal influences are, rather, reciprocal (1974 10).

In describing the impact these packages and carriers have upon consciousness, Berger makes his unique contribution to sociology by means of the phenomenological method: modern consciousness does not consist

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of ideas and theories people formulate; it is made up of the meanings ordinary people take for granted as they lead their ordinary lives. The aggregate of meanings which people share with each other in society—Berger terms it "pretheoretical" consciousness—makes up their social world (1974 12). We must not underestimate its importance, since the definitions making up the social world "... are essential to hold society together and ... to keep any particular social situation going" (1974 12). These definitions indicate the limits of what is possible; and they are "set not only by the external requirements of institutions but also, and fundamentally, by the structures of the human mind" (1974 20).

In identifying both the content and style of consciousness arising from the primary carrier of technological production, Berger centers on the ordinary industrial worker, not the scientist or engineer. He first explains the background or horizon that a worker takes for granted in everyday experience on the job. It consists of "... a vast body of scientific and technical knowledge, including a body of rules for acquiring and applying this knowledge ..." (1974 24). A knowledge of a hierarchy of experts and the worker's knowledge of his specific job are two important elements. Job-knowledge includes both content and style, for it implies the worker's capacity to retrain for comparable jobs. One of its features is "mechanisticity"—the awareness that the worker's actions are connected as an intrinsic part of a machine process. Correlative to this feature is "reproducibility": the worker's productive activity "... entails *participation in a large organization* and in a *sequence of production*" (1974 26). The final element intrinsic to the worker's cognitive style is measurability: the value of a worker's actions can be quantified with precision.

The cognitive style intrinsic to technological production has four main characteristics: (1)reality is seen, not as an ongoing flux, but as a series of units or components which can be interrelated; (2) the components and their sequences are interdependent; (3) means and ends are separable; and (4) a quality of implicit abstraction pervades the entire work process (1974 26–8).

This mode of consciousness has many consequences. Most important is the segregation of work from private life that derives from the specialized nature of industrial work. Although this can be carried over into private life, it has its own type of fantasizing: problem-solving, inventiveness and tinkering. Also important for this consciousness is the anonymity of social relations. The individual is mainly a functionary and not a whole person in the work context. This produces in the individual a double consciousness between concrete and anonymous identities. In turn, emotional self-management is required to maintain the distancing of self from work-world and private world. In the work-world, furthermore, the ruling assumption is maximalization: bigger and better is always preferred, and a potential to carry this over into the private world exists. Finally, within the realm of work the individual is required to maintain a con-

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sciousness of multi-relationality derived from the complex ties he has to things and people. However, when the individual's functional definition prevents him from identifying with the total production, there is the continuous threat of meaninglessness.

In turning to the impact of bureaucracy on consciousness, Berger first points out the basic difference between it and technology: unlike technology, bureaucracy is not intrinsic to any particular goal. That is, the manner in which bureaucratic processes are superimposed on a particular segment of social life is far more arbitrary than technological production, shaped as it is by productivity (1974 41–2).

The background of knowledge produced by bureaucracy is one of a vast system of which a particular agency is an instance. Different areas of social life come under different bureaucratic jurisdictions. The key notions latent in this awareness are "competence" and "proper procedure." Competence, the expert knowledge appropriate to each social sphere, includes "referral," which concerns the knowledge necessary to locate the appropriate bureaucracy, and "coverage," which refers to the tendency to leave nothing out so that new cases can be dealt with. Proper procedure entails avenues of redress from improperly applied procedures and centripetal impetus toward self-definition that never slackens, at the basis of which rests the assumption and even urgency to assert individual rights and personal autonomy. Modernized society and mass education with its offshoot of mass communication media are the main engines for this pluralizing impact on individual consciousness.

The effect of modernization on religion stems from the role religion has in the individual's life-plan. Religion, according to Berger, is usually the canopy that enables the individual to feel at home in the world. The very plausibility of religion is threatened by the discrepant meanings and meaning-systems of modern society. As individuals more and more often encounter others who do not believe as they do, religion's hold on society is weakened and the social process undergoes secularization. Those who hold on to religion then tend to privatize their beliefs, to see them as individually chosen rather than socially given and valuable. This is the most visible effect of modernization on religion. In consequence, the modern individual suffers from a deepening condition of homelessness. (1974 63–82).

Suffusing these fine-grained analyses is Berger's sensitivity to the uniqueness of religious experience, its historical and theological dimensions, and the paramount role it can play in the individual's life-world. Berger does not confine his response to modernization to mapping its course of development. He seeks, rather, to confront it with a critical sensibility that identifies those junctures in modernity where religious experience can contribute creatively to both the individual and society. *A Rumor of Angels*, (1970), *Facing Up to Modernity* (1977), and *The Heretical Response* (1979) are devoted to this undertaking. In *Facing Up to Modernity*,

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Berger identifies five dilemmas modernization has imposed on human life and raises the key question each poses. This critique in turn enables him to develop the contemporary possibilities for religious affirmation that occupies his third study. The first dilemma stems from the abstraction that permeates individual consciousness and is rooted in the institutional processes on which modernity rests: the capitalist market, the bureaucratized state, the technological economy, the large city, and the media of mass communication (1977 71–2). Abstraction at the social level weakens specific and relatively cohesive communities, which have provided humankind with solidarity and meaning throughout most of history. At the level of consciousness the result has been a carryover into other areas of personal life of the quantifying and atomizing cognitive style characteristic of the entrepreneur and engineer. For many, severe discontent has been the upshot. The key question posed by this dilemma is, "... how can there also be room in society for the rich concreteness of human life?" (1977 72).

The second dilemma originates from the time-scale that rules modernized social institutions. Their attention has shifted from the past and present to the future conceived in terms of precision, measurability, and, at least in principle, subjection to human control. This contrasts sharply with the time-scale of personal life. The key question raised by this dilemma is "... in what areas of social life it may be possible to do without clocks and calendars." The futurity of modernity, its endless striving, is detrimental to mental well-being (1977 73–4).

The question of individuation lies at the heart of the third dilemma. An unprecedented counterposition of individual and society has arisen from the progressive separation of the individual from collectivities. The impersonal character of modern institutions produces increasing possibilities for the individual; at the same time it eliminates or undercuts the older value of belonging. The key question posed by this dilemma takes two expressions, philosophical and practical. Philosophically, Berger asks whether the modern conception of the individual is an advance in our understanding or a dehumanizing aberration. The practical question asks: What social arrangements will at least partially satisfy the yearning for community?

The fourth dilemma concerns modernity's central notion of liberation. Modern social arrangements in technology and economics have brought into the domain of human choice large areas of human life previously deemed ruled by fate. Here, too, the key question takes on two similar forms. Philosophically, Berger asks whether there are limits to human liberation. He then raises the practical question of "... how to sustain ... social arrangements that provide at least a modicum of stability in an age of dynamic uncertainties" (1977 77).

The fifth dilemma concerns religion inasmuch as the pluralizing features of modernity constitutes a massive threat to the plausibility of re-

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ligious belief and experience. That is, modernity thus far has been antagonistic to the dimension of transcendence in the human condition. Religious experience has not disappeared, but its plausibility has withered. A central question here relates to the rights of religion in modern society and to the practical public policy-issues concerned with the separation of church and state in the United States (1977 78): "... how we, and our children, can live in a humanly tolerable way in the world created by modernization" (1977 80).

Although the pluralization and secularization inherent to modernization appear irreversible, they do not predetermine the actual shape of future events. The central image Berger offers to sustain the religious position is that of the heretic. The heretic in premodern society picked and chose from the contents of tradition; modernity creates a situation where picking and choosing become an imperative because now there is no clear, socially operative authoritative tradition (1979 28). This image enables Berger to explore the possibilities of passing from the widespread religious doubt modernity has produced to positive religious affirmation (1979 36).

Berger's explanation of religious experience is situated by a phenomenological investigation. What one experiences "... as *more real* and *for most of the* time ... when one is wide awake and engaged in activities that one identifies with ordinary, everyday life ... and which one shares most easily with other people" is called "paramount reality" (1979 37). Although this paramount reality is real and plausible because it is shared with others, it is also fragile and easily ruptured. Experiences of different kinds may rupture it: dreams, hallucinations, aesthetic activities, the comic, and the religious. (1979 37–40).

The ecstatic rupture of religion is related to two types of experience, the supernatural and the sacred. The supernatural refers to the "overwhelming other" which, once experienced, radically transforms the categories of time and space as well as self and other in ordinary experience. The experience of the sacred is not, however, necessarily linked to the supernatural. That is, one can have a religious attitude to mundane objects; and one can view the transcendent either non-religiously or sacredly. The religious experience therefore possesses two central and somewhat paradoxical characteristics: it is totally other; yet it possesses immense and even redemptive significance (1979 41–6).

Because the religious experience is difficult to sustain over time, it is embodied in a tradition which mediates it to those who have not had it (1979 46). And because it is motivated by an experience of a metahuman reality injected into human life, religious communication always takes symbolic form (1979 51).

Berger makes two other important distinctions that bear on the limits of any study of religion. Literal interpretation of the religious experience is not possible because of the metahuman element it possesses. Equally important, any theoretical reflection on the religious experience, either by

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those who seek to transmit it in a tradition or by those who only study it, must not fail to distinguish between the reflection and the experience. Ignoring this distinction can result in two different kinds of error. Either the distortive effect of reflection is ignored or the study of religion turns into a mere history of ideas. In both cases the religious experience disappears, a caution Berger sounds for both the religionist and the social scientist (1979 53–4).

Berger finds three possible typological options open to the religious thinker in confronting the problems of pluralization and secularization: Deductive, Reductive, and Inductive. The Deductive Option consists in reasserting the authority of a religious tradition in the face of modernity. The difficulty of sustaining subjective plausibility in the modern situation haunts this option. The Reductive Option seeks to interpret a religious tradition in terms of modern secularity. The difficulty confronting this option would be that the religious tradition and its content tend to disappear in the translation. The Inductive Option, which Berger advocates, is rooted in the modern situation and its heretical imperative, and it avoids reactionary nostalgia and revolutionary overenthusiasm (1979 60–1).

The Inductive Option assumes that all religions have something valid—"revelations of a higher life"—and tend toward a common goal. Berger takes the position that while Christianity is historically relative, it also possesses unique validity about the absolute (1979 150). Berger explains his option by treating three persistent problems that confront this option: a) how can false religious experience be recognized? b) on what grounds can persons adhere to their preferred religious tradition? and c) how can religious certainty be reached?

To the problem of false religious experience, he offers a cognitive test explained as "sober rational assessment" (1979 148). A particular insight of a given religious experience is weighed, he explains, by placing it in the context of all other human experiences and knowledge. Thus he advances no a-priori standard for testing but an experiential contextualism (1979 148).

He offers a somewhat similar solution to the problem of choosing one's preferred religious tradition. The various traditions in the religious world are not endless but reducible to some major types of religious possibilities in history. After clarifying the alternatives, the task is to find a normative measure that transcends the merely historical. Here, too, the norm is not given a priori; nor is it the direct result of empirical analysis. It arises, rather, from the free struggle of religious ideas. Berger admits it is a matter of subjective decision to root oneself in a particular tradition, but one that is open to others. He places his faith in the creative possibilities of one's tradition and can offer, although he does not say this, no assurance the tradition will survive the encounter (1979 150).

The problem of certainty, he acknowledges, resisted solution by all classical Protestant Liberals, but the problem is not, he contends, insoluble. What he advocates is "mellow certainty," one that grows continually

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and not one that attains or seeks terminal absoluteness. The quest for certainty, he observes, can be found only in momentary experiences, and it is bound to be frustrated in this world. Growth in certainty and not fanaticism is the answer Berger offers (1979 151–3).

2

Berger is alert to the objections that can be raised against his inductive approach and deals with them throughout his work. For him it is the only satisfactory choice open. Against the deductive approach of neo-Orthodoxy the inductive approach means starting with human experience and rejecting external authority. Against the reductive approach of secularized theology it means ". . . reassertion of the supernatural and sacred character of religious experience. . ." (1979 154). As for its plausibility structure, however, Berger says it ". . . *has no epistemological status whatever*" (1979 155). This last statement—whether it is a religious claim, a description of his position, or a philosophical assertion about the nature of religious language—throws a peculiar cast over his entire position. On the surface it appears contradictory in that Berger advances what he must want us to take as convincing arguments for three significant problems: recognizing false religious experience; justifying one's chosen religious tradition; and reaching religious certainty. Moreover, he claims his inductive option has greater plausibility for modernization than the other two options. A more direct confrontation with the philosophical implications in the inductive approach seems called for. Two observations may direct attention to the issues at stake.

In dealing with the problem of choosing one's preferred tradition, Berger argues for a normative measure that derives only from the free struggle between religious ideas, but in the end, he claims, it is a matter of subjective decision. This strongly suggests some version of the faith-seeking-understanding position and possibly of the ontological argument. If so, these philosophical positions deserve examination, since his "subjective decision" may have more plausibility than he allows for. The second observation concerns Berger's "mellow certainty" by which he calls for a growth in certainty and rejects absolutist claims. Hearing God's word is not touched by historical relativities, he holds, but the attentive listener must be open to the claims put forth by all religious traditions (1979 152–4). Such an open-ended dialogue at once rooted in one's chosen tradition and allowing for the transformation of the persons and content making up the dialogue has a precedent in American religious thought.

William A. Clebsch has identified it in the works of Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William James; and he calls it the creative tradition of American religion. In James' radical empiricism and pluralism one can find antecedents to some of the major themes in Berger's inductive approach (Clebsch 1973). Here also some confrontation with these

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cultural and philosophical precedents is in order for both the strengths they offer and the difficulties that have to be met. The central difficulty I find in the creative religious tradition Clebsch delineates is the absence of any consideration of the institutionalization of religion. In fact, church organization along with a preoccupation with dogmatic formulations were the bane of religious experience for Emerson and James. But surely today it is the institutions of modernized society, so graphically explained by Berger, that threaten and undermine the place of religious experience in the quest for achieving meaning in the world.

Berger does not resolve this central difficulty. He proceeds almost exclusively at the cultural level and leaves the institutional level of religion practically untouched. A review of his position will clarify this difficulty. His inductive approach is based first on a believer's subjective decision to ground himself in a particular religious tradition. The tradition Berger chooses is Liberal Protestantism, but he claims this tradition can be instructive for other traditions since it has confronted modernity more massively and for a longer period of time than others (1979 56). Second, his analysis of modernization has shown that pluralization and secularization increasingly threaten the plausibility of religious belief, its role as canopy. Third, he exposes the inadequacies found in the deductive approach of neo-Orthodoxy (its formulations cannot stand the test of plausibility *vis-à-vis* modernity) and in the reductive approach found in Bultmann and others (all translation models fail to capture the transcendent element in religious experience). The fourth step in his position arises from the predominant influence he finds in the various dimensions of modernity: technological production, state bureaucracy, urbanization, mass education, and mass communication. Thus he calls for the heretical imperative. Today we are all Protestants, he observes (1979 65). Finally, Berger describes the experiential and open-ended dialogue the religious believer should carry on with believers in other traditions in their joint heretical response to modernity. Unfortunately, analysis of religious institutionalization is missing. Denominationalism is frequently mentioned but only as an expression of religious pluralism. Nowhere is the institutional-creedal relationship examined *vis-à-vis* churches and sects as all three experience modernization. Berger does state that he writes out of his own religious tradition of Liberal Protestantism, yet when we examine his position with the view of locating it institutionally, difficulties arise.

His heretical imperative and inductive approach are rooted in a Christian commitment, and from this perspective his can be taken as a kind of prophetic statement. But to what kind of religious institution does he direct that prophetic call? His Liberal Protestantism has denominationalism for its institutional expression. But to which denomination is he speaking? Each denomination has a somewhat different creedal understanding about its place in society (see Richey 1977), and to speak about denominationalism as such is to locate oneself outside the diverse relationships

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that unite and separate the various denominations. His "institutional" location would seem to be in Bellah's civil religion, except that Berger brings a more clearly defined Christian message to his membership. What is the nature of that membership? what role does an individual have? and what institutional ties does he assume? Bellah's early description of this membership, although he may no longer hold this view as stated, seems applicable to Berger. Writing about modern religion, Bellah explained:

> Rather than interpreting these trends as significant of indifference and secularization, I see in them the increasing acceptance of the notion that each individual must work out his own ultimate solutions and that the most the church can do is provide him a favorable environment for doing so, without imposing on him a prefabricated set of answers (1970 43–4).

The difficulty I find in this position concerns the institutional resources that religious organizations must have to bring their members to a state of self-responsible agency. Elsewhere I raised the following criticism against Bellah's view of the modern church; it seems equally applicable to Berger's positioin:

> How churches can elicit support and commitment from their members and take responsible action on world issues with this kind of view is highly questionable for it places church collectivities in the same kind of fallacious position that nineteenth century individualism placed political economies; namely, presupposing a pre-established harmony of interests which guarantees the greatest good for the collectivity when each individual lives up to his own highest standards of conduct (Pepper 1970 85–6).

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