

A Contemporary Erasmus: Peter L. Berger

M. D. Aeschliman

Most people, Samuel Johnson told Boswell, don't get their opinions by reasoning; they catch them by contagion. This apparently gloomy view of the limited power and scope of human rationality and its social sources has been documented in great, illuminating, and often depressing detail by modern sociology, especially by the sociology of knowledge over the last century. The most substantial proponent of the sociology of knowledge over the last fifty years has been Peter L. Berger.

Born in Vienna in 1929, Berger immigrated to America in 1946. In his own words, he was "young, very poor, European and Lutheran, and wartime desperations had shaped my social and religious sensibilities." Living and studying in New York, he gravitated to that remarkable intellectual haven for refugees from European totalitarianisms, the New School for Social Research in lower Manhattan. In the mid-1950s he took a Ph.D. there in sociology and began teaching. With his Germanophone background, Berger encountered and benefited from the profoundly sophisticated, German social-scientific and humanistic

scholars, many of them Jewish, who had fled Europe to New York; but unlike many of them, he was never committed to Marxist or Freudian perspectives, and, even more unusually, he began the development of a bifocal intellectual career as both an academic sociologist and a Christian theologian.

Berger's importance has thus been, unusually, in two contrasting spheres whose relations over the past two centuries have been antagonistic, often vehemently so: theology and the social sciences. Radical sociology started in eighteenth-century France and then moved to Germany; but only from Mill, Marx, and Darwin on did it really conquer the more Christian and conservative Anglo-Saxon intellectual world (as Jacques Barzun noted seventy years ago, all three figures published ground-breaking books in 1859). The new social sciences, like the newly Darwinian natural sciences, saw theology and its ally metaphysics as the snakes around the manger of scientific truth that must be slain before the proper understanding of man's "true place in nature" could come to birth.

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Yet from the 1960s on, the cosmopolitan and sophisticated social scientist Berger, drawing deeply and learnedly on the great, Continental (largely German) radical tradition, has written a series of books that have revolutionized the sociological field in ways far more favorable to traditional Western religion and metaphysics than was conceivable before the 1960s. Perhaps Berger's most important works in this endeavor were three books from that decade that have had an immense influence in the field of sociology but also in the fields of theology and religious studies: *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (1963); *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (with Thomas Luckmann, 1966); and *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (1969). There had been some sophisticated Christian sociology before Berger wrote: the vast work of the great Italian antifascist, refugee, priest, scholar, and statesman Don Luigi Sturzo and T. S. Eliot's two works on Christianity and culture are examples. But given the left-wing bias of our intellectuals, and the lack of translations, the noble Sturzo's work never got traction in the English-speaking world. Eliot's works were profound but very brief.

Berger's works changed the very lay of the land: in effect, he "relativized the relativizers," exposing and undercutting the privileged status secular intellectuals had given to philosophical naturalism as a premise—a frequently covert or unavowed premise. Yet reason, conscience, will, human agency, and consciousness itself are by no means obviously "epiphenomena," merely "parts of nature" or determined without remainder by it. Wise men from Socrates to William James and C. S. Lewis have pointed out this fact, and thoughtful nonintellectual people have usually

assumed it. Governments and laws must assume some degree of human autonomy and personal responsibility as a minimum deposit of social and moral sanity.

By the early 1970s Berger's works were not only being prescribed in sociology and religious studies classes in colleges, graduate schools, and seminaries, but his brief and witty, yet profound, *Rumor of Angels* was also being recommended to the more general culture as a modern classic by magazines such as *National Review*. He was writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Commentary*, in addition to writing for or being written about in religious journals such as the *Christian Century*, *Commonweal*, and *Worldview*. Although neither an Evangelical nor a Catholic, he was trusted and read by many Evangelicals and Catholics. He had in fact become one of the main intellectual figures in the neo-conservative movement, alongside Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, and James Q. Wilson. In some sense, Berger and his friend and fellow Lutheran Richard J. Neuhaus were also the prime inheritors of the neo-orthodoxy of the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, probably the greatest moralist America has produced.

Berger's subsequent career as an urbane intellectual and scholar of world renown has had major chapters at Rutgers and Boston Universities, from which he recently retired, as university professor, full of achievements and honors including the Manés Sperber Prize for "significant cultural achievement" from the Austrian government. He is a characteristically urban intellectual, influenced by Vienna, New York, and Boston, but with an important distinction from many other urban intellectuals with cosmopolitan sensibilities: like the émigré Leo Strauss, who also

taught in New York at the New School, Berger always seems to have appreciated the relative, limited, but real decencies achieved by the American republic, to have been inoculated against utopianism while never becoming cynical, and to have always considered himself a “conservative humanist.”

His long and collegial friendship with the Lutheran-turned-Catholic theologian Richard Neuhaus, broken during the last, Catholic period of Neuhaus’s life, had from the beginning a tension expressed by Berger’s resolutely anti-utopian sensibility: in their joint volume, *Movement and Revolution* (1970), Neuhaus characterized himself as a Christian radical, while Berger wrote a powerful short manifesto on “Conservative Humanism” that he would reiterate, update, and apply repeatedly over the subsequent forty years of intense intellectual, religious, and political commentary, scholarship, and activity. Like Abraham Lincoln, Berger seems to feel, without any hint of triumphalism, that America is the “last, best hope of mankind”; he feels this despite the fact that he has remained in the most intimate dialogue with European and especially German intellectual life, has served as a major intellectual bridge between the two continents, and has founded and supervised a major research institute devoted to international and interreligious research and dialogue, the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University.

Among Berger’s several long-standing and outstanding intellectual perceptions has been his steady but often implicit critique of the idea of collective progress. This idea was pioneered by the French *philosophes* and Jacobins and then came to generate and dominate the mind-sets of Jacobins, Marxists, and “Whigs” throughout the

nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, especially within the universities. It is still with us today in ways elaborate, vulgar, or residual. Berger’s reading of sociology is heavily indebted to Tocqueville (himself a theologically literate Christian) and Durkheim among the French, but even more to the German sociological, philosophical, and theological tradition of Weber, Scheler, Husserl, Schütz, Gehlen, Otto, Troeltsch, Tillich, and Voegelin.

His intimate understanding and mistrust of the Comtean, positivist, “progressive” tradition may owe not a little to one of the German émigré New School intellectuals, Albert Salomon, who wrote a book called *The Tyranny of Progress: Reflections on the Origins of Sociology* (1955). Briefly put, the idea of collective progress as promoted by both Comte and Marx (and less reductively and fanatically by the Anglo-American “Whigs”) asserts that there is a collective, cumulative, inevitable, irreversible human progress represented in a basically three-stage movement in human history, as well as progress in each separate “science,” from animistic/polytheistic illusions, through monotheistic/metaphysical illusions, to scientific/positivistic truths. These enormously flattering, seductive assumptions and teleology are both reductive and utopian, providing a chief satirical target of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932).

The tragic twentieth-century history of Europe, in the midst of which Berger was born and raised, seems to have inoculated him against this “doctrine of progress.” As he says, when sociology is seen as “a secularized successor to theology as the mistress of the sciences,” in which the sociologist “plays the role of arbiter of all branches of knowledge for the welfare of men,” this idea frequently leads to “fantastic pretensions” and a militant, utopian, “secularist catechism.” A conservative, he wrote in

1970, “accepts the messiness of history and is suspicious of the idea of progress.”

Yet despite both reading and teaching, imbibing and purveying, what he calls “the bitter wine” of skeptical social science, a debunking endeavor, over a long professional life, there is a curious, moving, structural, and thematic feature to Berger’s work from its very earliest publications in the early 1960s to recent books such as *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (1997). That characteristic is a combination of wit, humor, and eloquence that gives a decisive mark to his literary style and is never merely ornamental: illuminating even the most densely abstruse and gloomy sociological discussions and dynamics, this style may be called “grave levity.” It is present even in the titles of some of his books: *The Precarious Vision: A Sociologist Looks at Social Fictions and Christian Faith* (1961); *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (1969); *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (1979); and *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic* (with Anton Zijderveld, 2009).

From the very earliest publications of his career, and despite the tragic pathos of twentieth-century history, Berger has been an opponent of both “humorless scientism” and “grim theologians.” Keenly aware of the need for “merciless [sociological] debunking” of social roles and pretensions in the interest of truth, in America as everywhere else, Berger nonetheless never indulges the “dripping venom” and “savage disillusionment” with American life that he attributes to Thorstein Veblen. A witty man himself, however much he admires the “morally neutral” wit of Oscar Wilde and H. L. Mencken, Berger asserts his dislike of both authors for their proud

display of “a cynical weltanschauung that I find offensive.”

The sociological project to which Berger has devoted his career is prima facie disillusioning and depressing, yet he believes that, in the words of a great modern novelist, “if a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst.” A “full look” requires us to confront the pervasive contingencies of human experience and development and to realize the degree to which we are conditioned beings, a realization that must follow even the most successful initial socialization—even if, as Coventry Patmore put it, “my childhood was a vision heavenly wrought.” Although Berger admires the Middle Ages in some respects, he does not indulge the nostalgia for cultural integration to which all of us are prone who see a culture largely in ruins today, a pornotopia of twisted values with highly refined means and corrupt and idiotic ends.

Berger’s understanding and description of modern social dynamics are unsurpassed by any living writer. Being no “progressive,” neither is he an optimist. The sociologist, he says, should “always be aware of what Max Weber called the unintended consequences of social action and others have called the irony of history.” Yet he values the gains for liberty and individuality in modern life, repeatedly remarking on the important modern movement since 1500 in Europe, and subsequently in America, from “fate to choice,” from social determination to individual elective activity. Again, the titles of his books are illustrative: *The Social Construction of Reality* (with Thomas Luckmann, 1967) and *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (with his wife Brigitte Berger and German brother-in-law Hansfried Kellner, 1973).

In developing this line of analysis in a profound, philosophically literate way,

Berger is one of the jewels in the crown of modern sociology, along with Americans Daniel Bell, Robert Nisbet, and Philip Rieff, and Englishman David Martin. Like all of them, he is a conservative who refuses reductionist eliminations of the metaphysical-religious dimension of reality. “The difficulty that ensues when people cease to believe in God,” as G. K. Chesterton put it, “is not that they then believe in nothing, but that they believe in anything.” Commenting on Michael Harrington’s plea for a post-Christian “democratic socialism” in 1983, Berger wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*: “To believe in ‘democratic socialism’ in the second half of the twentieth century requires an act of faith by comparison with which the beliefs of Protestant fundamentalists appear to be a paradigm of sober rationality.” Commenting in the same *Review* two years earlier on Shiva Naipaul’s book on the 1978 “Jonestown” mass suicide in Guyana of the members of the San Francisco “People’s Temple,” Berger wrote: “One of the book’s most absorbing portions is the account of the enthusiastic endorsement of Jones’s movement, almost to the bitter end, by a long line of prominent American representatives of ‘radical chic.’”

Berger acknowledges and fears the dangers of secularization, desacralization, and reductionism for social order: “A society held together only by functional rationality is likely to disintegrate or to become progressively more coercive,” he wrote in 1983. In his most recent book he has anatomized and warned against “The Dynamics of Relativism”: “Relativism has massively invaded everyday life, especially in Western societies” owing to “the pluralization of social life worlds,” though also because of “increasing numbers of people going through an educational

system in which teachers propagate relativistic ideas” such as multiculturalism and scientism. “With the rise of the sciences in the Western world, we have witnessed the birth of what has aptly been called scientism—the often quite fanatic belief in the omnipotence of the (mainly natural) sciences and their technological applications.” In making this critique, Berger is in the good company of Dostoyevsky, Henri Bergson, A. N. Whitehead, Michael Polanyi, C. S. Lewis, Stanley Jaki, Leszek Kolakowski, Jacques Barzun, Pope John Paul II, and Pope Benedict XVI.

Berger’s discussion of the dynamics of secularization, pluralization, pluralism, relativization, and relativism is exceptionally illuminating and valuable, and has been developed with great precision and depth over half a century. The division of labor, industrialization, urbanization, affluence and leisure, and technological innovations facilitating rapid transportation and communication and eclipsing temporal and spatial isolation (as well as stability and privacy) have increasingly created one world socially but have hardly created a coherent world cognitively or normatively. The questions Berger asked in a 1977 *Commentary* essay, “Are Human Rights Universal?,” have proved difficult to answer: “which rights?” and “sez who?” Today the “pluralization of social life worlds” and even of individual “lifestyles” may as accurately be seen as conducting to amoral anarchy as to moral liberty (how antique the phrase sounds!). In their recent work *In Praise of Doubt*, Berger and his Dutch colleague Anton Zijderveld are eager to distinguish sociological pluralization (an empirical, descriptive category) from “pluralism,” an ideological stance, and to distinguish both from thoroughgoing relativism. They might have benefited from a distinction between “deep

pluralism” and “shallow pluralism” proposed by the Catholic historian Glenn Olsen. Deep pluralism logically entails that conflicting and contending parties really have no authoritative common factor that both recognize as normative; deep pluralism would exist between the Nazi and the Jew, to give a painful example. Shallow pluralism asserts, or more usually assumes, that many different lifestyles and beliefs are possible and permissible within a society or a human world but that there are fundamental ideas, standards, procedures, and behaviors that all such individuals and groups voluntarily, even if only implicitly or semiconsciously, subject themselves to or accept in order “to live and let live.”

The U.S. Founding events, documents, and institutions (and Lincoln’s correction and completion of them) constitute the best large-scale modern political example of this decent minimum of social consensus. Berger doubts if “the American Revolution . . . can be correctly described as a revolution. . . . It was too conservative for that.” The widespread ignorance and cynicism about the American Founding are very bad signs of social-political decadence. (Given the behavior of our Wall Street, Madison Avenue, Hollywood, and professorial elites, it will hardly do to place much of the blame for this decay on unfortunate and uneducated blacks and Hispanics. The dominance of seventy-five years of so-called progressive, antihistorical, ineffectual public education has had a particularly crippling effect on them, and on most middle-class white children as well.)

Deep pluralism is ultimately inconsistent with social order and logically leads to anarchy and civil war, for it is in fact the logical expression of that thoroughgoing relativization of both epistemological and ethical, or cognitive and normative, concepts and

behaviors that ultimately provide not only social order but personal sanity. As Daniel Bell has noted, both “antinomianism” and “anomie”—moral anarchism and psycho-emotional normlessness—come from the same etymological root: denial of *nomos* or law, which of course is cognitively linked with elementary standards of language and logic.

Throughout Berger’s career, he has directed attention to the human disposition and need for order, often quoting Eric Voegelin’s work and particularly Voegelin’s assertion that “the order of history is the history of order.” For most of the human past, the enemies of order could simply be seen as criminals—Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Vandals, Goths, marauders, barbarians, thrill seekers, murderers, rapists. Yet, in the early-modern era, the chief problem could plausibly be seen as the abuse of order by self-interested individuals, groups, and institutions. Shakespeare never doubts that usurpers and tyrants such as Macbeth and Richard III are simply evil, but neither does he doubt that “decent Godly order” is needed to suppress appetite, “the universal wolf,” which else will devour all, as articulated in Ulysses’s great speech in *Troilus and Cressida*. Two hundred years after Shakespeare, Burke asked, “What is liberty, without wisdom and without virtue?” He answered, “It is the greatest of all possible evils.” Burke and Tocqueville mocked the libertinism and will to power of the French *philosophes*, and Burke and Tocqueville, Berger wrote forty years ago, are “among the intellectual mentors of my type of conservatism.”

But beginning with these libertine, “enlightened” French *philosophes*, and especially with Burke’s contemporary the Marquis de Sade, the intellectually relativizing processes of modernity, with which Berger’s lifelong work has largely been

concerned, began in earnest. A succession of radically libertarian or libertine figures increasingly “emancipated” themselves and “declared their independence” from both epistemological and ethical norms: Max Stirner (“Ego Deus mihi”—I am God to myself), Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Nietzsche (who read Emerson) worked out the implications of this “liberation,” as Quentin Anderson showed for the Americans in his classic study *The Imperial Self* (1971). Its numerous progeny include Social Darwinist capitalists and post-moral hipsters, from Whitman to Allen Ginsberg, Norman Mailer, rock culture, and the voluble postmodernists and deconstructionists.

Berger has clearly grown increasingly worried that this relativism has now “massively invaded everyday reality,” as he puts it in his most recent book. Following Dostoyevsky, a Berger contemporary and longtime ally, the English sociologist David Martin, long ago noted the philosophical-metaphysical root of the epistemological crisis: “The existence of God and the [belief in the] objectivity of value go hand in hand.” Inaugurated in earnest by Sade and Stirner, articulated with poignant rhetorical power by Nietzsche, popularized in America by the apparently benign Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, and augmented by Darwinism, the deconstruction and dismantling of the Western sources of epistemological, ethical, and social order have been promoted with truly bacterial effect on “logocentrism” and common sense by nihilistic Francophone relativists such as Foucault, Derrida, and DeMan and their many American admirers and disciples in the humanities and social sciences. The velocity and momentum of this nihilism are very great throughout the West today,

something many Muslims and others in the Third World dimly understand and vigorously detest.

Yet from the American founders and framers (and their contemporaries Samuel Johnson and Edmund Burke) onward through Lincoln, Tocqueville, Acton, and a host of thinkers over the last century, there has also been the continued momentum and trajectory of the “logocentric” tradition itself, originally generated by Plato, Aristotle, and the Judeo-Christian tradition. It was a modern Russian, the Dostoyevskian philosopher Sergei Levitzky, who noted that “the denial of the Absolute leads to the absolutization of the relative,” in effect, to the deification of the self. We then live, as C. S. Lewis put it, in “a world of incessant autobiography.”

But the rational self-contradiction of this position is thoroughly discrediting and stultifying. As Berger and Zijderfeld put it, “All versions of relativism have one problem in common: How are relativistic thinkers to exempt their own thought from ‘deconstruction?’” This thematic-performative self-contradiction has been pointed out by distinguished modern philosophers such as A. N. Whitehead, Michael Polanyi, C. S. Lewis, Leo Strauss, Bernard Lonergan, and Harry Jaffa. A pithy, ironic example of the thematic-performative self-contradiction given by Whitehead has become famous: “Scientists animated by the purpose of proving themselves purposeless make an interesting subject for study.” Leo Strauss usefully showed that Max Weber’s claim to be “value-free” could not ultimately be sustained, however heuristically useful the idea of “value-freedom” may be as a research method.

Yet a major reason for Berger’s prominence and importance is that he has not limited himself to such fundamental theoretical and descriptive considerations,

important as they are. Instead, he has actively involved himself in what might be called a neoconservative, civil-society project, a desire to identify and strengthen those sources of social-moral health in modern society that free the individual from atomistic isolation—*anomie* and *antinomianism*—as well as from the statism (left or right) so often proposed as its remedy. A deep suspicion of the “big state,” however benign its overt intentions, has characterized and distinguished Berger’s thought from the beginning and may well have its roots in the fate of his native Austria in the 1930s. (It is well to recall that Max Weber dismissed the Swiss Jacob Burckhardt’s similar dread of the growing power of the German “Second Reich” after 1871 as “small-state envy.”)

The major focal concepts and factors in this civil-society project are federalism, voluntary associations, intermediate groups, mediating structures, non-governmental civil-society interactions, and localism, entailing a focus on Burke’s “little platoons” of human association and mutual aid that serve as educative “seedbeds of virtue” and antidotes to demoralization in both senses of that word, as havens for what Berger calls “the homeless mind” of modernized, secularized consciousness. Prime among these associations are families, churches, and neighborhoods. This social focus was pioneered by Burke and Tocqueville, who saw it as central to the success and future prospects of American democracy, and was subsequently developed by renegade or heterodox social movements and groups. Among them are Catholic, neo-Thomist projects of “subsidiarity” following Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891), English Distributism (G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc), the American Southern Agrarians (including a contemporary such as Wendell Berry),

neo-Calvinist “sphere sovereignty” as developed in the Netherlands and the United States by Abraham Kuyper and his followers (including contemporary American thinker Charles L. Glenn Jr.), and recent thinking and policy provisions concerning faith-based charities identified with Marvin Olasky and President George W. Bush.

The key document here was a joint effort by Berger and his longtime friend and ally Richard Neuhaus called *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society*, first published by the American Enterprise Institute in 1977 and then republished in 1996, with commentary and critique by other scholars and a reply by the original authors. Berger and Neuhaus reiterated their commitment to “the strategic importance of . . . intermediate institutions,” as well as their analysis of “the basic configuration of modern society, which puts vast, anonymous, and potentially oppressive mega-structures against the vulnerable worlds of individuals. Foremost among these mega-structures . . . is the modern state.”

Yet, to repeat, Berger, like Whittaker Chambers and W. F. Buckley Jr., is far from being an uncritical admirer of that post-moral “individualism” most depressingly represented by the continuing popularity of the sophomoric Nietzschean Ayn Rand and those libertarians who believe only in “market outcomes,” who know “the price of everything and the value of nothing.” In light of such feckless vulgarity, he has a healthy, Christian sense of human fallibility: “One must never underestimate,” he wrote in 1996, “the human capacity for forgetfulness and imbecility.”

Of Berger’s students who have continued and developed his work and characteristic concerns with particular depth and force, at least two are worthy of note: James Davison Hunter of the University of

Virginia and Charles L. Glenn Jr. of Boston University. Especially in *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991), Hunter has brilliantly critiqued self-styled “progressivism” by analyzing the fault line and contrast between adherents of the secular, “enlightened” mind-set and adherents of a more traditional, usually religious, sensibility: the former provide our volatile American elites; the latter our recalcitrant masses. In *The Myth of the Common School* (originally a second dissertation, under Berger, by this already important educational policy specialist, 1998); *The Ambiguous Embrace: Government and Faith-Based Schools and Social Agencies* (2001); and his continuing series of books written with his Belgian colleague Jan de Groof on educational freedom throughout the world, Glenn has developed and applied a powerful sociological mode of analysis indebted to Berger and the neo-Calvinist Abraham Kuyper in defense of the rights of parents, religious groups, and other nongovernmental groups to conduct educational and charitable institutions that help to keep the civil-society sphere free of overwhelming state regulation. Both of these scholars themselves exercise influence today: Hunter particularly on the American scene and Glenn among American Evangelicals and also among policy-forming elites in Europe and elsewhere abroad.

Trying to see Berger’s career and work in terms not only of the present and future but also of past models and trajectories, one is reminded of another sophisticated Christian humanist who wrote a half a millennium ago. Somewhat remote in space, very remote in time, and apparently infinitely remote in cultural circumstance, Peter Berger and the Renaissance Christian humanist Desiderius Erasmus nonetheless resemble each other in important ways. Both lived on an apparent cusp

of human change. Erasmus lived during the emergence of an implicitly man-centered humanism that intoxicated part of the Italian Renaissance; Berger lived during a period of apparently liberated, scientific triumphalism that nevertheless coincided with catastrophic disconfirmations of human wisdom and goodness. Both Erasmus and Berger failed to please some of the orthodox but equally failed to please the critics of the religiously orthodox. Erasmus criticized the (real) corruptions of the Renaissance papacy and the superstitions that it exploited but refused to leave the Catholic Church. Berger showed in excruciating detail not only the “social sources of [religious] denominationalism,” but, much more humiliatingly, the very contingent sources of much religious belief itself, yet himself remained a quite orthodox Christian.

Beyond the circumstantial similarities, there are theological and literary affinities. Erasmus was an orthodox Catholic Christian who not only mocked the many corruptions of the Renaissance papacy and church, but raised doubt about the dominant Scholastic epistemology and the clerical regime. He defended free will against “grim [Protestant] theologians.” He used satire and humor to deflate clerical but also secular pretensions. Similarly, from early on Berger has evinced a profound sense of the ridiculous. (In the Anglophone world, this would situate him with figures such as More, Swift, Peacock, Chesterton, and Muggeridge.)

Berger also served his apprenticeship: he learned and practiced the grammar and method of the inherited sociological, Scholastic priesthood—left-wing, socio-political, “value-free,” “progressive”—and took its practice to a world-class level. Yet he argues its ultimate inadequacy and the need for metaphysics and theology. Like

Erasmus, he has a sense of incongruity, not of nihilistic, antinomian absurdity (the default position of modern intellectuals, artistic and scientific), but of benign, theological paradox. His wit, humor, and satire are constitutive and thematic, not ornamental and incidental. “Man is incongruent within himself,” he quotes the contemporary German philosopher Plessner as saying. Berger explicitly invokes Erasmus and *The Praise of Folly* to argue for human openness to Divine Wisdom, a “wisdom that passeth understanding” but does not ultimately violate it. Berger’s *Redeeming Laughter* should take its place beside another classic contemporary work on the intersection of the comic and the truthful, M. A. Screech’s *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (1997), which also examines the great Renaissance Christian humanists such as Erasmus, to whom Berger, at the end of a long, productive life, clearly feels a close affinity. Both Erasmus and Berger are orthodox ironists.

In Berger’s work, the social scientist is also a theologian; the witness to our human humiliations is also a metaphysical wit. Having promoted both rational detachment and interreligious dialogue

for several decades, Berger is nevertheless insistent that attacks on the reality and autonomy of the self, whether from radical skepticism or radical transcendentalism, must be fought: “This means saying no to every denial of the autonomous self, because that is tantamount to a denial of the reality of freedom. This no must then be said to every version of freedom-denying scientism; it must also extend, with all due respect, to the Buddhist understanding of *an-atta*” (that “all reality is non-self”).

The biblical vision of reality, he writes in a recent book, “presents us with a God beyond nature, and man is ‘in the image of God’ precisely by sharing this ‘unnatural’ quality.” There is “an essential element . . . within man that transcends nature. It is the element that constitutes the core of individuality, the agent of freedom and the bearer of rights.” The real lineaments of that individuality, and of the social milieu needed to support it, have been steadily illuminated and defended in a fifty-year body of work that makes Peter Berger a precious asset for our turbulent and tattered republic, and for the larger, long-term project of a global civilization.

Books by Peter L. Berger referred to or quoted in this essay: *The Precarious Vision: A Sociologist Looks at Social Fictions and Christian Faith* (1961); *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (1963); *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (with Thomas Luckmann, 1966); *Movement and Revolution* (with Richard J. Neuhaus, 1970); *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (1969); *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (with Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, 1973); *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society* (with Richard J. Neuhaus, 1977; new edition, 1996); *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (1979); *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (1997); *Questions of Faith: A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity* (2004); *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic* (2009).