

INSIGHT

Responding to plurality with respect, humility



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Earlier this summer, Peter Berger, a major sociologist of religion and author of more than 30 books, died at age 88. He had held major positions at The New School for Social Research, Rutgers University and Boston University.

Many of his well-known books began coming out in the 1960s when I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and they had a significant impact on my thinking. His publications during that decade included: "The Noise of Solemn Assemblies," "Invitation to Sociology," "The Sacred Canopy" and (with Thomas Luckmann) "The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge."

During the time when most academics and even some noted theologians were proclaiming the death of God and appearing in cover stories in Time magazine, Berger was not ready to join the chorus. His book "A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural" found hints of transcendence. The hints were not in theological treatises or doctrines but in the everyday activities of living. He wrote of an "otherness which lurks behind the fragile structures of everyday life." It might be

a mother's assurances to a frightened child that everything will be all right, or in the hope in the face of a terminal illness that death is not the end. The rumors might also be in the human condemnation of evil, which reveals a belief in a moral order, or in the play and laughter that affirms meaning in the face of destruction.

In his early career he promoted the secularization thesis that the modern world was inevitably becoming more secular, not just by the separation of church and state but also by a "secularization of consciousness" in the way in which we think. He later rejected this because, especially in countries outside Western Europe, the evidence did not bear it out. The world was, in fact, becoming more religious. What was occurring, however, was an increase in the plurality of religious beliefs.

FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND

As societies become more diverse and communication and media make the world smaller, people become aware of many ways of belief, and the idea that there is only one truth becomes harder to affirm. The reaction to this had two extreme responses, Berger argued. One could retreat to a fundamentalism that refused to see one's beliefs as being in a historical and cultural context. To have absolute certainty, one denies any element of truth in alternate understand-

ings. The other extreme is relativism; there is no truth, it is all just one's opinion.

But Berger took the next step in criticizing relativism's claim as a "superior form of knowledge." As he puts it: "that relativizing analysis, in being pushed to its final consequence, bends back upon itself. The relativizers are relativized, the debunkers are debunked — indeed, relativization itself is somehow liquidated. What follows is not ... a total paralysis of thought. Rather, it is a new freedom and flexibility in asking questions of truth."

The middle ground between the extremes is acceptance of the plurality of beliefs and worldviews. This "pluralism" brings a freedom to decide and a need to define what is the core of one's faith and what is less central and open to possible change. It can bring one to an intellectual modesty. Yes, there is absolute truth, but I may not possess complete understanding of that truth. In fact, my interaction with other people and their different beliefs is not to be feared, but will help me better define what my core belief is and what I may need to question and potentially revise.

In a recent interview, Berger summarized his position in this way:

"Modernity does not necessarily produce secularity. It necessarily produces pluralism, by which I mean the coexistence in the same society of different worldviews and

value systems.

"That changes the status of religion. It's a challenge for every religious tradition. But it's not the challenge of secularity; it's a different challenge. The problem with modernity is not that God is dead, as some people hoped and other people feared. There are too many gods, which is a challenge, but a different one. ... Another way of putting it is to say that the modern challenge is how to live with uncertainty. The basic fault lines today are not between people with different beliefs but between people who hold these beliefs with an element of uncertainty and people who hold these beliefs with a pretense of certitude. There is a middle ground between fanaticism and relativism. I can convey values to my children without pretending a fanatical certitude about them. And you can build a community with people who are neither fanatics nor relativists."

Peter Berger's influence on me many years ago has stuck with me these many decades. Yes, we cannot deny the plurality of cultures and beliefs, but we can choose to accept a pluralism that seeks to live peacefully with different religions and worldviews. It is a form of "loving your neighbor" which doesn't require agreement but does call for respect and a certain intellectual humility. Let this be our goal.

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