

# The Essence of an Accidental Sociologist: An Appreciation of Peter Berger

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This is a rather personal and provisional attempt to catch the essence of a major scholar who entitled his instructive memoir of 2011 *Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist*. I shall not attempt any appraisal of those seminal works by Peter Berger from the early sixties onwards that have had an impact on the thinking of all of us. Nor shall I attempt to look at his notable and creative collaborations, above all with Thomas Luckmann and Hansfried Kellner, let alone comment on his lifetime's conversation with Brigitte Berger. My title is accurate, and I hope it allows me to begin with some initial recollections of my friendship, my indebtedness, and my intellectual companionship with Peter Berger. These recollections also illustrate some of our fundamental agreements.

After that initial excursus I want to reflect on Peter Berger's unique place and role in sociology, especially the sociology of religion. I shall take the opportunity to say something about our discipline as an instantly recognisable form of intellectual activity, while at the same time being very disparate and crossing all kinds of boundaries. We sociologists sail in the same sea with the same compasses and with similar equipment, but our routes often barely cross. Yet I begin precisely with the way Peter Berger's trackways have intersected with mine.

I first read Peter Berger browsing through new books in the London School of Economics library and drawn by a title that promised something different, *The Precarious Vision*, published in 1961. It was in a genre I have myself practised from time to time which I call socio-theology and it spoke of a release enjoyed by social scientists and

Christians alike from bondage to social fictions and the fragile tissue of man-made institutions. At that time the depredations of the late sixties and seventies had not yet fully apprised me of the importance of man-made institutions or the dangers of liberation from social fictions. I was already dubious, yet intrigued, because I knew Berger's language and where he was coming from. I had recently been a critical observer at a conference on Bonhoeffer and *The Death of the Church* and I had seen the later sixties prefigured in theology, and not, as sociologists might suppose, merely reflected.

Somewhat later, maybe in *Theology Today* for October 1967, I read Peter Berger on the subject of Barthianism. I was again intrigued, because it seemed Berger had abandoned the Indian rope trick of Barthian theology and was in pursuit of what in 1969 he called *A Rumor of Angels* and 'signals of transcendence' entirely *within* our human projections. Not being a Barthian myself, I rather relished the way Peter Berger put down and relativised the absolutisers in the Barthian mode.

I first encountered Peter Berger more directly some time after I had written my initial critique in 1965 of ideological elements embedded in the concept of secularization. To my delight as a young lecturer I received an appreciative letter from Peter saying that I had a worthwhile point, but that something major had changed since the seventeenth century (let's say), and if we were to abandon the catch-all notion of secularization then we needed to formulate what that change was.

Peter gave me a chance to engage with others in that enterprise in 1969 when he invited me to a consultation at the Vatican on 'The Culture of Unbelief' organised by the Secretariat pro non Credentibus. At one point the 1965 article about secularization came in very handy. As it was hot, the group I was chairing decided we would be better

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occupied walking on the greensward around the Villa Borghese. When we returned Peter told me an Italian Television crew had arrived and I must offer them the fruits of our labours. Deeply embarrassed I explained there had been no labours to speak of, and Peter just said ‘In that case just make them up’. This I did in a way which astonished my group and myself because I simply rehearsed the argument of my critique of secularization.

Then there was the occasion later in 1969 when I chaired a lecture by Peter Berger in the famous Old Theatre of the London School of Economics on what was for him a very typical theme, *Sociology: Radical and Conservative*. This must have been the point when so far as these people were concerned Peter Berger came out for what he really was: someone with a quiet nostalgia for the multicultural pluralism of Austria-Hungary. Quite a segment of radical London turned up to hear the radical first half of the lecture assuming that Peter was not only an analyst of the social construction of reality but an ardent advocate and prophet of its deconstruction. I also think some of them had read a witty and seminal article he had published in 1964 with Hansfried Kellner in *Diogenes* on the mutual collusions generated in the family, and they were excited because they supposed he was a natural partisan of the dissolution of the family.

When the charismatic prophet ceased to prophesy and turned to the second part of the lecture on the theme of sociology and social conservation they were restive and outraged. Peter Berger reproached them for their bad manners, and said he drew comfort from the fact that such politically hyper-active people had to sleep, and might one day be properly burdened with the responsibilities of parenthood. This drove them into a manic fury, and I had to bring the event to a rapid conclusion.

Peter had lighted on the unpalatable fact that a child of the Enlightenment like sociology was also capable of undermining the key empirical assumptions of its parent ideology. Sociology is bound to recognise the logic of conservation and stability as well as the logic of change, and to acknowledge the ambiguities of what people too easily believe are the unambiguous gains of progress and liberation. Peter Berger was right to refer to manners, sleep and parenthood. Manners, sleep, automatic habit and the respects and pre-emptive assumptions of responsible parenthood, are the prerequisites of revision and renewal, and sharply constrain the pursuit of existential authenticity, Protestant sincerity, and untrammelled freedom. The reaction of radical London was not all that surprising, and maybe the radicals intuited the existence of an earlier left-wing Peter Berger. These people had read Berger in a way that fitted the preoccupations of partisans of the early Marx, oblivious of the existence of other people on the right and the older left, let alone those you might just call realists, who believed there

really was an external facticity about social processes. Peter could easily be read as a prophet of emancipation from a false consciousness of seeming external facticity when he was really an analyst of limits. His emphasis on external facticity reflected his debt to Durkheim and to the notion of *les faits sociaux*.

The next occasion that comes to mind happened near Aldersgate St. in London, which happens to be where Wesley had his heart ‘strangely warmed’ on May the 24th, 1738. Methodists treat May 1738 in Aldersgate St. as Pentecostals treat April 1906 in Azusa St. LA, and the two events are closely connected. Peter was lecturing and afterwards he asked whether I was interested in studying the growth of Pentecostalism, because if so he would be happy to provide the research funds. That project was made for me though I did not realise it, precisely because Methodist revivalism and street preaching were part of my childhood. When Peter wrote a foreword for my *Tongues of Fire* he summed up my argument in the striking phrase ‘Max Weber is alive and well and living in Guatemala City’. I think that is right even though Pentecostal churches may illustrate what Weber had to say about the economic and social ties fostered by the small sects in America rather than the rather more famous argument about capitalist accumulation and Calvinist Protestantism.

Peter Berger has a unique capacity to formulate the essence of an argument in a striking phrase. He did it again when he wrote about exceptional Europe and unexceptional America when it came to the relation between religion and modernity. That was entirely compatible with what I had argued in *A General Theory of Secularization* (1978) about the way secularization in modernity is historically inflected by whether or not religion is aligned with the local nationalism and the local version of the enlightenment, but this phrase captured the central paradox dramatised in the difference between Europe and North America. Other formulations like Ronald Inglehart’s ‘path dependency’ or S. N. Eisenstadt’s ‘multiple modernities’ have expressed roughly the same truth about the historical inflections of secularization but they fail to capture the exemplary character of the dramatic differences on the western and eastern sides of the Atlantic.

Peter and I were propelled by seeming accidents into sociology and these stemmed from religious and humane commitments, for example our dislike of capital punishment. We might well have stayed within the ambit of theology except that we wanted to see how faith worked in practice and why the practice was often at odds with the precept. We were ‘lone believers’ in a rather irritated mode and acutely conscious of the fragility of the Church while being convinced of its necessity. At any rate we were sufficiently engaged to want a close up look at the details of sin rather than sin generically. We

wanted to investigate the contexts that brought out propensities to different varieties of sin and those that placed sharp limits on the exercise of virtue.

We were each a kind of liberal conservative, but lay awkwardly athwart the dominant liberal consensus in mainstream sociology and the presuppositions of liberal theology, in particular those liberal theologians who used sociology as a persuasive adjunct to their theological commitments, like Harvey Cox. We found our own way and were under mild sentence of ex-communication for committing the wrong kind of idiosyncrasy by sociologists and theologians alike: canons to the right and cannons to the left. Peter Berger likes Evangelicals without agreeing with them and believes every country could benefit from having a Texas, whereas those liberal Protestants he agrees with make him uneasy and queasy. Our interlocutors were not in our national and international professional associations.

Here I turn to an area where we differ and therefore to the explicit positions adopted by Peter Berger. I have no public profile as a cultural conservative with a small ‘c’, whereas Peter Berger is a public intellectual with a clear political profile. Perhaps that is partly because it was not the British who poured tea into Boston Harbour, but it is mainly because the British revolutionary tradition is not rooted in the a suspicion of central government and the imposition of taxes by federal authorities. In Britain, welfare centrally administered has attracted a religious and political consensus for at least a century. Here Peter Berger is distinctively American. Most sociologists prefer the real politics of compromise and negotiation to the sentimental politics of gesture, and most sociologists probably prefer the faults of western democracies, like chronic indecision in the face of crisis, to the faults of centralised tyrannies. But most of us do not come out and embrace capitalism with explicit enthusiasm. We like to enjoy its benefits while keeping our moral credentials clean and grumbling about the opportunities capitalism provides for inordinate greed. Peter Berger is not that kind of moral wimp. In books like *Pyramids of Sacrifice* in 1974 and *The Capitalist Revolution* in 1986 he weighed the pros and cons and came to a decision. That is rare and potentially costly, given we live in a capitalist society where everything that goes wrong can be attributed to the system.

That does not mean he has embraced a raw real-politik. His framework is always implicitly moral. No matter how much sociologists declare their value freedom and their emancipation from normative concerns they remain chronically disposed to emancipatory projects. A moral aura surrounds almost everything we do and say. Consider, for example, the implicitly positive evaluations implied by the word ‘indigenous’ and our ready use of the word ‘corruption’. Sociologists as a tribe, at least in America, are not attracted to Machiavellianism either as a norm to

be pursued in practice or even as a plausible account of what we may expect from practising politicians. That kind of despairing cynicism is reserved for Europeans like Pareto and Sorel, or the British political philosopher John Gray who thinks the delusions of enlightened Liberalism just a modern variant of the delusions of Christianity unchecked by a proper recognition of original sin. Then there is the Australian sociologist John Carroll, who believes Luther was right about the bondage of the will and Erasmian humanism wrong, but he would be under plenary sentence of excommunication supposing anyone read what he writes.

Now I come to the main part of what I want to say concerning our discipline and Peter Berger’s central role in it. We all have mental maps of sociology, otherwise we could not operate in it. One map is for immediate practical use, deployed subconsciously and uncritically, but there is another map we can construct from a more detached perspective if pushed to think about it. Thinking about Peter Berger has pushed me to think about maps of our discipline. According to my subconscious and uncritical map, Berger figures as the most influential and attractive voice of the last half century. I think that would be also true of any map I might project from a more detached and impersonal perspective. The 2007 *Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (which is incidentally astonishingly different from the 2001 *Blackwell Companion*) says that he set the agenda for the subject in his works of the sixties and seventies. Behind that statement there lies a complicated situation capable of providing the most assiduous researcher with material on the politics of the academy and its relation to moral panics and the pursuit of funding.

Here I interpose a query about the shift to research on Fundamentalism and on New Religions that absorbed energies in the eighties. Peter Berger has himself later provided a clue about what lay behind the interest in fundamentalism as essentially reactive, though he might also have mentioned the liberal search for the immoral equivalent in the West of Islamic fundamentalism and the attempt to absorb Pentecostalism under the head of cultural imperialism at the expense of genuine liberation and authentic indigenous culture as defined by western intellectuals. The academic interest in fundamentalism in part stemmed from an understandable desire to exploit a liberal moral panic about what people in the two-thirds world get up to. In his introductory chapter to *The Desecularization of the World* (1999) Berger asked rhetorically why people in the MacArthur foundation and in American elite universities thought fundamentalism so strange and mysterious it required a multi-million pound grant and several volumes of (interesting) case studies to understand. It is not, of course, that Peter Berger has been indifferent to changes in the two thirds world. As I shall suggest in my conclusion Peter Berger

has consistently devoted his energies to whatever in his view may assist improvements there. It just happens that he has done so in ways consistent with his own moral vision rather than with other people's.

Even when I draw a map from an impersonal perspective I start to pick out features of our discipline usually below the level of active cognisance. We all know perfectly well that every discipline fragments into discrete research communities with their own preoccupations, and that these in turn are bound up with who knows whom, including influential figures, like Rodney Stark. But once you stare harder at the map you realise it is dotted with *terra incognita* and major discontinuities. The problem is there are very few figures like Rodney Stark, apart from Peter Berger, and they are so unlike each other they barely inhabit the same universe. Their spheres of influence do not intersect because their methods and modes of operation are so disparate.

As I inspect my map more closely I detect other major spheres of influence, for example, Robert Bellah, Robert Wuthnow, José Casanova, and perhaps Bryan Wilson. But again each sphere of influence turns on its own axis. I happen to find Milton Yinger, Robert Nisbet and Edward Tyriakian congenial, but their spheres, however bright and shining, are surprisingly isolated. As for someone like Werner Stark, Peter knows about him, but his five volumes on the sociology of religion were always on the outskirts of our sociological universe. The man himself was virtually ex-communicated by Bryan Wilson, partly I suspect because he wrote as a Roman Catholic with a European perspective and range of reference alien to the Anglo-Saxon Protestant mind. Even now you may be wondering whether Rodney Stark had a hitherto unknown brother.

I am inviting you to measure the distance between the mental universe of Rodney Stark and the mental universe of Peter Berger not in order to denigrate Stark but because on the global scene Stark is the only comparable influence, and these spheres of global influence barely intersect. You might suggest that is partly because Berger does not engage in the kind of macro-history you find in Stark's history of monotheism. But that aspect of Stark's work is not what propels him forward on the global scene, and with more time we might ask why his big historical books are relatively neglected, just as one might ask why Berger's theology has been *relatively* neglected. Stark has a global presence because he proposes a scheme for ordering virtually anything in the social world in the theory of rational choice, and moreover it is a theory which generates a familiar and easily deployed vocabulary. Peter Berger himself deployed this vocabulary back in 1963 as a metaphor derived from economics useful in the discussion of ecumenism. But he did not persist with the metaphor as an all embracing scheme.

It so happens there is an interesting convergence, evident in Garry Runciman's *The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection* (2009), between rational choice and the surge in socio-biological explanations based on survival and adaptation. Here it serves my purposes to note that Robert Bellah, a major influence on any criterion, has adopted and adapted this in his massive book on *Religion and Human Evolution* (2011). This book represents the culmination of a life-long interest in human and religious evolution dating back to a major article in 1964. But the commerce between Bellah and Berger is not greater than the commerce between Stark and Berger. The turn to biology and the cultivation of 'cognitive science' is not one of Berger's preoccupations, understandably so given his embrace of the 'world-openness' of the human psyche.

Of course, Peter Berger and Robert Bellah resemble each other in some ways because both are public intellectuals and both have been major commentators on the American condition. Bellah is an American who stands on the social democratic left as Peter Berger is a European on the liberal conservative right, so they are both similar in being strikingly atypical. They are also alike in their conspicuous moral commitments, notwithstanding their insistence on value freedom and methodological atheism or agnosticism. But in their own primary intellectual spheres, in what Berger would call their *opus proprium*, they are poles apart.

One could multiply instances to reinforce an argument about disparities and discontinuities which is already sufficiently obvious. I could also give examples of the way certain terms, like 'the privatisation of religion', with their intertwined normative and descriptive implications, writhe through our discourse like the entrails of a snake in motion, with no clear origin or obvious intellectual location. That I leave to any graduate student looking for a subject. I mention only one other major influence in the sociology of religion: Bryan Wilson on millenarianism, secularisation and sect formation. I suggest rather tentatively that Berger's early emphasis on pluralism as corroding religious commitments had only a minimal relation to Wilson on secularisation and rationalisation. As for Wilson's overriding interest in varieties of sect formation and New Religious Movements, such issues have only lain at the margin of Berger's concerns, in spite of his interesting early work on Bahai and on Pentecostalism in Puerto Rico. Maybe neither the Bahai nor Pentecostalism are really in the sectarian category, but more importantly I suspect Peter is more interested in institutional religion, particularly the institutional forms of great world religions, than in sectarianism or spirituality. In the same way I doubt whether Peter shares the current concern with secularism, and post-secularity that exercises such a major scholar as José Casanova.

The themes of secularism and post-secularity remind us that there are, of course, powerful influences operating

at a stellar distance: Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor and Alisdair MacIntyre from philosophy. One could also cite Edward Shils, Philip Rieff, and Daniel Bell as sociologists who were not specifically sociologists of religion but had a serious interest in it, as well as Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz and Claude Lévi-Strauss from anthropology. Anthropologists *have* to take religion seriously, but if I were to ask where Peter Berger and Mary Douglas overlap, the answer is that Mary Douglas never dealt in *nomoi* and *cosmoi* and Peter Berger has not been much interested in ‘dirt as matter out of place’ or issues of purity and danger.

So while we properly claim to be social scientists, occupants of a disciplinary field, because we are governed by logic and evidence, our contributions have very personal markings, and our existential point of departure makes a difference to where we end up and frames our contributions as social scientists. We are people writing about people, and that means Peter Berger is right to describe our science as one of the Humanities. His *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (1963) was so successful and engaging because we felt we shared the experiences of the author. We had been there and done that, and supposed sociology was in an important way about *us*. That is why Berger’s *Invitation* was taken up by over a million people. And that is why some of them felt misled when so little of what they read thereafter fulfilled the existential promise of Berger’s writing. I used to recommend the *Invitation* to students with a warning: after that you are going to be disappointed. You might just as well decide to read theology because fired up by Peter Brown’s *Augustine of Hippo*.

Our intellectual history is as odd as our intellectual geography. That emerges quite clearly once you ask who came before Berger. Ernst Troeltsch died in 1923 and Max Weber in 1920, and Berger came on the scene forty years later in 1961 with *The Precarious Vision*, which, as I indicated earlier, was the first book I read suggesting a change of tone and direction. But we have to think hard to come up with the names of major figures that seriously altered the profile of our subject in the interim. It is true that Talcott Parsons was writing about religion and the implications of social differentiation for religion, and that Karl Mannheim published *Ideology and Utopia* at the beginning of the thirties, a work that not only looked at chiliastic movements but extended the foundations of the sociology of knowledge on which Berger and Luckmann were to make their seminal contributions. It is also true that Will Herberg’s *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, and studies by Richard Niebuhr on sects and denominations, and on Christ and culture, expressed and stimulated public interest in society and religion. But issues of society and religion are not the same as issues in the sociology of religion. Lenski’s *The Religious Factor* came out in 1961 and maybe signalled the kind of interest shown by the political

scientist S. M. Lipset. Apart from Joachim Wach’s *The Sociology of Religion* written in the mid forties from the perspective of the history of religions, the forty years between Weber and Berger were an almost trackless wilderness. Of course, this is not to deny that the ideas of (say) Marcel Mauss on ‘the gift’, Maurice Halwachs on memory, and Max Scheler on *ressentiment* and the sociology of knowledge, impinged on the sociology of religion, for example in Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s development of Halwachs in *La Religion Pour Mémoire*.

There was the Francophone school of *sociologie religieuse* that traced variations in belief and belonging according to social milieux and documented the secularisation of much of Western Europe, but with little interest in theory. I do not know whether Peter Berger was ever that much engaged by *sociologie religieuse*, though he clearly read it, but I suspect that till quite recently French scholars lived in their own world. Maybe they took their world to be all there really is, just as they take their Enlightenment to be the only real Enlightenment. At any rate my point is that the last of the forefathers died in the early twenties and their themes, orientations and theories lay fallow until they were revisited nearly two generations later. As for Simmel he had to wait even longer than that.

Just as we constantly revisit old sites originally quarried by old masters so we habitually ask where a contributor is coming from in order to understand the conclusions he has arrived at. I remember Peter Berger lecturing at the influential Institute of Economic Affairs in London on the relation of religion to economic development. Someone asked a question and Peter responded by querying ‘where he was coming from’. The questioner said that was irrelevant and clearly thought that issues float free of their particular personal and cultural contexts. There are times when I have some sympathy with that viewpoint and some antipathy towards attempts to undermine arguments by reference to their ideological and personal placement or what some people call ‘positionality’. But the man was clearly not a sociologist and we as sociologists prefer to assess ideas with at least some reference to where there the flack is coming from and its direction of travel and targets. Our universal default position is that ideas are situated.

We also feel the need to trace the historical origins of our key ideas because they are located in particular cultural traditions. Unlike physical scientists we do not forget our founders, and for Peter Berger the pre-eminent and inexhaustible master is Max Weber. Berger is an instinctive Weberian, because he is interested in subjective meanings more than the metrics stressed by positivists, and because he thinks there is more to social causation than the material forces stressed by Marxists. Once you think meaning matters you are a Weberian, and anyone whose original point

of departure lies in the questions of meaning raised by theology and religion, is likely to find Weber congenial. Of course there are other scholars who take seriously meanings and signs in the German tradition of *Geisteswissenschaft*, and for Berger the principal carrier of that tradition was Alfred Schütz, just as for me it was Wilhelm Dilthey. But Weber is fount and origin for all those who understand sociology both as scientific and one of the Humanities, as *rerum cognoscere causas*, the attempt elucidate the causal nexus of *things*, and as *Geisteswissenschaft*, the attempt to understand intimate meanings in all their semantic and spiritual depth.

I want now to come to a final section mainly devoted to the moral and theological positions lurking behind Peter Berger's work, and to approach these matters through the unexpected route of his style of writing. Peter Berger is a writer and a stylist in what is not his first language. As a public intellectual he is a remarkably persuasive advocate, gently easing people into agreement. He also has a talent for the kind of formulation that men in business and affairs feel they can apply to their own concerns. He can cross the divide between intellection and practicality. The formulation looks simple because all the confusions surrounding it have been absorbed and pared down to essentials.

This is a rare gift shared with a very select group of people, like Robert Putnam. As a sociologist of religion he deploys an elegant style lightened by humour that draws the reader in as a participant in the argument. Actually there are several sociologists of religion who write decently and clearly, partly I suspect because like Berger they have often had their initial intellectual schooling in other humanistic disciplines, including literature. But Berger has a unique gift for communicating complicated ideas in engaging formulae and in short sentences with their own seductive rhythm. Berger knows how to be light in manner and heavy in content: hence his exploitation of jokes, and his reflections in his 1997 book *Redeeming Laughter* on the sociological and theological meaning of incongruity. Jokes are a symptom of his seriousness.

Lightness of touch conceals consistent moral concern and theological depth. When it comes to moral seriousness, it is a platitude that radicals can easily end up as conservatives by a kind of intellectual arthritis, or because radicalism is always surpassing itself, and likes to believe it is always moving on and upward. In Berger's case I suspect there is an underlying consistency that only appears to change ground because faced with different situations. Part of that consistency derives from an obstinate refusal 'to follow a multitude to do evil', as strongly recommended in Exodus 23, verse 2. America likes to think of itself as the home of creative individualism unafraid to explore unlikely hypotheses and unpopular positions. Sociologists also have this same self-image and it would follow that American sociologists are paragons of conscientious independence and innovation.

But there is another truth noted by Berger. Americans often demand conformity and only particular sectors of opinion and particular ways of expressing those opinions are allowed. The pressure to conform is especially strong on matters within the ambit of political correctness. I remember being asked by a Pakistani brigadier after a couple of gins on an aeroplane whether the fact that Jews were a hundred times fewer in number than Muslims and had received a hundred times as many Nobel prizes, meant that Jews were exceptionally intelligent, and explaining I was not allowed to answer that question. If political correctness were merely a modern way to be courteous to others who differ from you in opinions or in social provenance Peter would be politically correct. In fact it is form of censorship which affects what we allow ourselves to say, and the apologies we deploy when risking a novel opinion to show that we are really on the right side. Peter Berger is a genuinely autonomous thinker and does not bother with any of that.

That is why he is sceptical of the claims of the intelligentsia to be the brave pioneers of the future and of Karl Mannheim's notion that they are 'relatively detached' when they blatantly promote their own interests as much as anybody else. Earlier I remarked with just a hint of mischief that Peter Berger relativised the Barthian absolutists: more fundamentally he relativises the relativisers, without himself being a relativist. That is important because there are widespread tendencies to pan-relativism, especially in anthropology, derived from an incoherent and morally irresponsible agenda of indiscriminate respect. I remember Peter Berger in dialogue at Lancaster University with the anthropologist of religion, Fiona Bowie, and finding she believed *dogmatically* in pan-relativism.

Peter Berger has, of course, changed his opinions over time, for example over secularisation, and even gone so far as to edit and introduce a book in 1999 on *The Desecularization of the World*. People who never change their mind are strangers to the dilemmas and paradoxes of serious intellectual work. Yet I want in conclusion to emphasise again the consistency of his moral convictions. It is rather too easy to suppose that shifts of viewpoint have something to do with ageing as well as hard experience, and there are bound to be those who note that both Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus were once allies on the radical wing of American politics in relation to the civil rights of African-Americans, and that both seemed to shift their positions, and even found themselves at odds over the issue of abortion. Yet both Berger and Neuhaus were consistently loyal to America, Neuhaus to the point where he thought America had no right to be wrong over abortion. Peter Berger retained his moral position when he turned to issues of development in the two-thirds world, notably in South-East Asia but also through a prolonged involvement in the ending of apartheid in South Africa.

I also think Peter Berger has been consistent in his embrace of transcendence and his rejection of any move to empty out into pure immanence the power of what he has called *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity*. Perhaps I might close with a quotation from *A Far Glory* (p. 211). It comes at the end of passages elucidating two canonical texts we have in common, Paul on law and grace, and Weber on ‘Politics as a Vocation’, and it asks how one may take a conscientious decision in a world where pluralism makes a *prise de conscience* feel fragile and unsupported. We must, Berger says, undertake that *prise de conscience* and (I quote) ‘recollect what I know, and have faith that what I know is the truth. This is not a formula for immunity against the corrosive effects of relativity. If relativity is a stormy

sea of uncertainties, this faith does not magically make the waters recede so that we can march through them on a dry path. What it does do is give us the courage to set out in our little boat, with the hope that, by God’s grace, we will reach the other shore without drowning.’

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