

BOOK REVIEW

“Peter Berger’s in Praise of Doubt”

by Skip Forbes PhD.

Before the reader becomes upset with or put-off by the title of this book, I beg you to not prejudge it but to hang with me to the finish. Then and only then you may pass judgment on the book and this review. This is a book about the role of doubt in a person’s life. Its thesis is that some level of doubt is healthy for our intellectual lives. It

has application to both our religious/theological as well as our secular/civic lives. *In Praise of Doubt* is co-authored by Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld. Berger, who will be the primary reference point in this review, is the better known of these two authors and arguably our nation’s leading sociologist and founder of The Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University. Berger will be cited in this review as the primary author. This volume was published in 2009 by Harper One, a division of HarperCollins (New York).

As an introduction to this book some definitions are in order that will orient the reader to a nuanced view of doubt. The word “doubt” needs to be thought of as a continuum, as in shades of doubt. In its noun form, doubt ranges from a simple wavering or unsettledness in opinion to being *inclined to disbelieve*, to absolute doubt or settled disbelief. Its adjectival form is often rendered to mean simply not clear, or suspicious, or ambiguous. Synonyms can include dubious, suggesting vague suspicion or hesitancy; questionable, suggesting that there are reasons for doubt; problematic, suggesting uncertainty with no implication of a deeply moral element to the subject, simply that there are legitimate questions about the topic (see Webster’s *New World Dictionary, College Edition*).

A “verbal sibling” to doubt is to be skeptical/a skeptic. This is a term that also needs to be

considered in a nuanced way. In its noun form, it can range from a person who exercises a kind of common sense skepticism about a given proposition (e.g., that there is a herd of giraffes roaming outside your window right now), to one who is a philosophical skeptic who doubts *specific cherished* civic claims (e.g., the value of democracy) or religious claims (e.g., the resurrection of Jesus), to an absolute skeptic who habitually questions or who maintains a skeptical spirit about everything (e.g., that any certain truth can be known and asserted at all).

The spirit of this book is stated in its preface page and a citation from Johann Goethe, the well-known German poet: *If we did not have doubts, where would be the joy of certainty?* Berger is suggesting that there can be certainty about many things but that doubt is the *vehicle* to get there. Implied is that doubt compels us ask the hard and perennial questions; doubt forces us to investigate thoroughly; doubt constrains us to think beyond the superficial and the “taken-for-grantedness” of our cultural and religious lives; and doubt necessitates that we uncover and defend *reasons* for our certainty. It is doubt that obliges us to test and explore, and in the process of doubting arrive at a healthier intellectual and mental state in both our cultural and religious lives. Ironically, while doubt often derives from fear (of the unknown, of the “heretic” or supposed heresy, or of our self-known inability to engage and respond in a thoughtful way), it is really the best avenue to a considered measure of certainty.

Chapter One, titled “The Many Gods of Modernity,” sets the context for Berger’s thesis. The Enlightenment era (18th century) was marked by a cold, hard rationalism, a kind of philosophical skepticism toward all things social, political and religious. Many Enlightenment thinkers “anticipated the demise of religion in a spirit of gleeful anticipation” (p 1). This era would come to full fruition with Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844-1900) famed assertion that God was “dead.” What he meant by this had nothing to do with whether or not God actually existed in some domain but that the *idea* of God had become unnecessary, therefore “irrelevant” to real life. One can’t determine God’s existence because “God cannot be the object of an experiment,” he is not empirically accessible (p 1). So religion had failed to make certain its number one assertion – God exists. Religion and religious approaches to certainty must be illusory, they said. Further, the “atrocities” produced by religion (ah, that old and unanswered perennial problem of the coexistence of a holy and merciful God and evil in the world) confirmed that religion/theology was unhelpful in determining what civic life should be like. It has been common to think that the Enlightenment marked the end of religious life. “In the sociology of religion, as it developed in the twentieth century, this association of modernity with the decline of religion came to be known as ‘secularization theory.’ This theory proposed that modernity, both because of the spread of scientific knowledge and because modern institutions undermined the social bases of religious faith, necessarily led to secularization (understood as the progressive decline of religion in society and in the

minds of individuals)” (p 3). But according to Berger, a funny thing happened on the way into the 20th and 21st centuries – an explosion of theologies/religions. Many theologies! Berger observes that “As one looks over the contemporary world, it is not secularization that one sees, but an enormous explosion of passionate religious movements” (p 4). One need only take a cursory look to find confirmation of this phenomenon – the worldwide growth of Islam, the enlarging numbers of distinct American denominations, the robust development of the Roman Catholic church (especially in the non-European sections of the world), the growing development of a conservative Anglican communion in Africa, the revival of the Eastern Orthodox faith in Russia, the growth of Orthodox Judaism in America and in Israel, and the growing re-emergence and popularity of Asian religions (e.g., Buddhism, Shintoism, etc.). “In sum: It cannot be plausibly maintained that modernity necessarily leads to a decline of religion.... what does it lead to in the area of beliefs and values? The answer, we think, is clear: *It leads to plurality*” (p 7). Plurality is understood as, “a situation in which diverse human groups (ethnic, religious, or however differentiated) live together under conditions of civic peace and in social interaction with each other. The process that leads to such a situation we would call ‘pluralization.’ Our thesis here, then, can be succinctly stated: *Modernity pluralizes*” (p 7). In other words, the modern world has produced a phenomenon wherein people of diverse backgrounds and worldviews, living in close proximity to each other and learning to know one another more deeply, learn to get along.

Berger explains how and why this is so. The reasons why modernity pluralizes are readily understandable. Through most of history most human beings lived in communities that were characterized by a very high degree of cognitive and normative consensus – that is almost everyone shared the same assumptions about what the world is like and how one should behave in it. Of course, there were always marginal types, people who questioned these taken-for-granted assumptions – individuals such as, say, Socrates. But such individuals were quite rare. In other words, there wasn’t much conversation between whatever diverse groups may have crossed each other’s paths. The walls of social segregation were very high.

Modernity, with its increasing speed and scope, weakens these walls. It has resulted in an ever-increasing proportion of the population living in cities, many of them huge – and cities have always been places where diverse groups go to rub shoulders on an ongoing basis. With that worldwide urbanization has come the spread of ‘urbanity’ – the urban/urbane culture that’s nurtured by plurality and in turn fosters the latter. Furthermore, there are massive movements of people across vast regions, again bringing very diverse groups into intimate contact with each other. Mass education means that more and more people are aware of different ideas, values, and ways of life. And, last but not least, modern means of mass communication – films, radio, television, telephones, and now the explosion of information through the computer revolution – have brought about an enormous increase in people’s ability to access alternative approaches to

reality. As a result of these processes – all endemic to modernity – plurality has reached a degree unique in history (pp 8-9).

Berger then traces what happens next, sort of “connects the dots” that end in cultural pluralism and produces “doubt.”

What takes place under conditions of genuine plurality can be subsumed under a category used in the sociology of knowledge – ‘cognitive contamination.’ This is based on a very human trait: If people converse with each other over time, they begin to influence each other’s thinking. As such ‘contamination’ occurs, people find it more and more difficult to characterize the beliefs and values of the others as perverse, insane, or evil. Slowly but surely, the thought obtrudes that, maybe, these people have a point. With that thought, the previously taken-for-granted view of reality becomes shaky (pp 10-11).

This process can happen within individuals as well as entire communities of people. We live with people as neighbors, as employees, as church members, as sports enthusiasts, as students, as members of the civic community, as Rotarians and Optimists, in all the venues of daily life in which people meet and learn about each other. We learn that our fellow citizens, with differing worldviews and opinions, are not bad people. They simply see the world and its issues differently. Enter the human phenomenon we call “choice.”

Berger asks us to think about the many choices we have in our daily lives. Choice began at the outset of human history and moves forward to the place where today we make many hundreds of choices each day, perhaps many millions during our lifetimes from the daily mundane to the life-defining. Daily choices range from the selection of foods we eat (Wendy’s, Mickey Ds, or Olive garden), books we read (fiction, non, or none), activities we participate in (golf, softball, or the arts), shopping preferences (WalMart, Elder Beerman, or Macy’s), sources of daily information (CNN, Fox, or MSNBC), etc. Then there are the more life-defining choices. “Modernization has enormously increased the array of choice in...life. Typically, a modern individual can choose whom to marry, how and where to set up the household resulting from the marriage, what occupation to train for in order to support or help the household, how many children to have, and (last but not least) how to raise those children. Again, there are entire systems to choose from – systems of marital relations, systems of education, and so on. Additionally, the modern individual can select a specific personal identity, such as traditional or progressive, straight or gay, disciplinarian or permissive. In much of the developed world, modern identity is chosen, is a sort of project (often a lifelong one), undertaken by countless individuals” (p13). Berger notes that in America even ethnicity has become a choice. Such choices and decisions represent some of the more important *cognitively significant and lasting* choices.

One more interesting factor has been developed by researchers in sociology. Within

every society there are choices that are part of the foreground, that is, choices that are permitted, while there are also choices that are part of our background,” that is, choices that are “preempted” by the social ambience, so-to-speak. Berger notes that a society that operates only according to *foreground* (only according to the choices of its members) would not be able to sustain itself. Unregulated choices by every citizen would devolve into chaos. On the other hand, a society operating only according to its *background* (preempted ideas or choices) would not be human at all, “only a collectivity of robots...” (p 14). Background orientation and activities, taken-for-granted ideas and ideals, become *institutionalized* over time. But with the introduction of increased choice, institutions are subject to *deinstitutionalization*. Modernization has affected the balance between background and foreground in that it has put us in contact with more people, more ethnicities, more societies, more worldviews, and therein creating more options. So, “*Modernity greatly enlarges the foreground as against the background*. Another way of saying this is: *Modernity tends to deinstitutionalize*” (p 17).

Now the question becomes – how does **this modernization à pluralization à doubt à choice trajectory effect religion? Berger disagrees with** those who say that modernization has produced a rampant secularization of our culture. As has already been noted, religion has been a veritable growth industry. He observes that, where secularization theory went wrong was the assumption that these choices were likely to be *secular*. In fact, they may very well be religious. *Chosen* religion is less stable (weaker if you will) than taken-for-granted religion. In addition, it *may* be more superficial (that is, have all the triviality of consumer choices in the supermarket). But it need not be.... The plural situation thus changes the place of religion in the consciousness of individuals. One could describe this consciousness as being layered in terms of ‘degree of certainty’ – from the ‘deep’ level of taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the world... through the more or less stable beliefs, ‘up’ to the level of easily changed opinions. In individual consciousness, religion ‘percolates up,’ as it were, from the deeper level of certainty toward the more fragile level of mere opinion, with various levels in between those two. It is important to understand that this change doesn’t necessarily affect the *content* of religion. A traditional, taken-for-granted Catholic may adhere to the same doctrines and practices as a modern individual who is Catholic by preference. But the location in the consciousness of these doctrines and practices will be different. Put differently, pluralization need not change the *what* of religion, but it’s likely to change the *how* (pp 18-19).

So, for example, a Baptist might say something like, “I’m a Baptist, but...” She may accept many of the traditional Baptist beliefs but not accept a particular doctrine, say a pre-tribulation rapture, or a traditional Baptist practice of single immersion as a condition to local church membership. Choice, especially in a culture like ours that features choice as a cultural value, grants her permission to *qualify* her denominational orientation. An additional feature of pluralization is how religious institutions relate to each

other. “Churches, whether they like this or not, cease to be religious monopolies and instead become *voluntary associations*” (p 20-21). Generations ago, religious institutions were more like monopolies – not nearly as many choices, and what choices that existed were limited by totalitarian governmental or religious regimes. In modernity, Berger says, sociology trumps ecclesiology (p 21). Now they are “competitors in a free, or relatively free, market” (p 21). Now, in America we have a kind of free market denominationalism which is operating under the constitutional guarantee of religious liberty. The US Constitution has assured us that there is no singular taken-for-granted theological belief system. And even if the state were to attempt to impose limits on such liberty, the modernity à pluralizing à doubt à choice à free market à competition dynamic would not permit it.

The next two chapters deal with the natural result of pluralization – relativism. Chapter Two is titled “The Dynamics of Relativism,” how and why relativism works. Chapter Three is titled simply “Relativism” and deals with the effect relativism has on the way people see others who have different religious and moral ideals as well as a critique of this way of thinking. The next series of citations by Berger provide several ways to define or understand the spirit of relativism. Relativism is the view that asserts “there’s no single, universally valid ethical system, but the moral values and behaviors of all, or virtually all, human cultures can be welcome additions to one’s own ethical tradition” (p 51). It goes “beyond a denial that truth is difficult to achieve, it is to assert the very notion of truth as meaningless and should be abandoned” (p 52). In a typical postmodern spirit, “It’s not only difficult to escape the bias determined by one’s location in history and society, extreme relativists argue, it’s impossible and, in the final analysis, undesirable. There’s no such thing as objective truth. Indeed, there are no objectively verifiable facts. There are different ‘narratives,’ all equally valid” (p 52).

Now the question becomes – how does relativization work? “We can most easily see what relativization is by looking at its opposite: The opposite of ‘relative’ is ‘absolute.’ In the realm of cognition, there are definitions of reality that have the status of absoluteness in consciousness” (p 23). These are the obvious, the common sense, the taken-for-granted matters. As I write this I am looking out the window while pondering. I see an external world that I am convinced is really there. I can see it because it is revealed to me by my senses. If I swivel in my chair so that I cannot see out the window, I still *know* this external world is there. On the other hand, some ideas are not so certain, things like *beliefs* and *values*. “Relativization is the process whereby the absolute status of something is weakened or, in the extreme case, obliterated. Although the evidence of one’s senses carries with it a claim to absoluteness that’s very hard to relativize, there’s a whole world of definitions of reality that are not based on such immediate sense confirmation – the world of beliefs and values” (p 26). This category of matters is open to interpretation and can be challenged and weakened by those with their own taken-for-

granted perspectives. Thus it is that plurality challenges our integrity by asking us to reconsider views in which we have had a stake. If we are reasonably objective and honest with ourselves, such challenges create a cognitive dissonance wherein we have to say something like, “Hmmm, you have a point.” In acknowledging another’s point, our own is “weakened” to some degree. So, Berger points out that, “Plurality, then, can lead to tolerance” (p 28). Berger could have developed what is meant by “tolerance” further. While acknowledging that tolerance is increasingly valued in the Western world, he does not qualify his remarks further. I would like to have read something like – this is not necessarily the tolerance of *agreement*, as in “I will change my point of view to yours,” but the tolerance of *acceptance* as in, “I do not agree for the reasons stated, but I take your point as another way to interpret the issue and acknowledge its merit.” It seems to me that the very word tolerance implies something like, “I have a case to make against your view.” To tolerate implies *disagreement* as in, “I will put up with your view but I really don’t like it.” It should *not* be used to imply agreement.

As a consequence of relativization, three groups of people have emerged – the exclusivist, the pluralist, and the inclusivist. The exclusivist “concedes little if anything to the relativization process: Christianity is reaffirmed in ringing tones as the absolute truth.... The pluralist position goes as far as possible in conceding to other traditions the status of truth, and in giving up any number of historical Christian doctrines in this process of cognitive bargaining.... The inclusivist position is in the middle. It continues to affirm strongly the truth claims of one tradition, but it’s willing to go quite far in accepting possibilities of truth in other traditions, and it’s willing to abandon elements of the affirmed tradition in making various cognitive compromises” (pp 38-40). Berger notes that if one takes an inclusivist approach, one must be prepared and have some way to distinguish what is *central* to one’s faith and what is ancillary and does not matter because it is not a defining element. Only then will one be able to decide what elements need defending and which can safely be let go. Berger follows this discussion with a series of anecdotes to illustrate people who have distinguished the central from the tangential. In a 2010 book (*Between Relativism and Fundamentalism*, Wm. B. Eerdmans’ Publishing Co.), Berger devotes an entire volume to the history of how various religious and political traditions have labored to find a “middle ground” in attempts to create cultural situations in which people can live together in civility and harmony. My favorite chapter in that book is by evangelical Os Guinness and is titled “Pilgrim at the Spaghetti Junction: An Evangelical Perspective on Relativism and Fundamentalism,” worth the price of the book.

Now, what happens when one doesn’t like cognitive contamination and the dissonance it offers, or if one cannot process dissonant ideas and offer reasonable rebuttals because one is too invested in taken-for-granted ideas? The only alternative is to avoid the “carriers” of dissonance (p 32). Chapter Four is titled “Fundamentalism.” Berger notes that there are all kinds of fundamentalists, secular as well as religious. In every form of

fundamentalism, certain common themes prevail that define non-negotiable core beliefs. Examples would be secular fundamentalist scientists and their core belief that the hard sciences are to prevail over all unverifiable religious metaphysical theories. In the economic domain a core defining ideal would be an unfettered and minimally regulated free market system. Examples of core values among fundamentalist Christians would be their seven core beliefs of the Triune Godhead, the pre-existence and deity of Christ, the inspiration of Scripture, etc. For conservative Republicans it would be small government and lower taxes. That said, it must be understood that fundamentalism also contains three characteristics that relate to relativism. First, fundamentalism is always a reactive phenomenon (p 71). It is not timeless in that it is always reacting against some perceived threat; in the present discussion it reacts to modernity, the cause of plurality. Second, fundamentalism is by definition a modern phenomenon (p 71). It does not represent some golden age of ideals. Fundamentalism “*is very different from traditionalism*. Traditionalism means that the tradition is taken for granted; fundamentalism arises when the taken-for-grantedness has been challenged or lost outright” (p 72). Fundamentalism arises in response to a threat to a hard won absolutism. Third, fundamentalism arises out of a realization that the “*pristine past of tradition... can't be regained... therefore the fundamentalist project is inherently fragile*” (p 73).

So, in its attempt to restore tradition and its taken-for-granted core beliefs, and while realizing that relativism must be “kept at bay” (p 76), fundamentalism must resort to the only alternative left to it – the imposition of traditional ideals. How to do this? First, *There must be no significant communication with outsiders*” (p 82). This is a sort of “shoot the messenger” strategy that attempts to avoid cognitive contamination. As with all fundamentalisms, the world is conceived of as dualistic – those who are on the inside because they know the truth and those who are to be kept on the outside because they can't grasp the “obvious truth” (p 82). The second part of the strategy is that outsiders must be converted, re-educated so they get it right (pp 82-83). This is necessary because “*There must be no doubt*. Fundamentalists, in particular, can't tolerate doubt; they seek to prevent it at all costs” (pp 83-84). People who do not like to test or stretch their faith or have it tested by others seek to avoid doubt. And they tend to cast the “other” as a “heretic” or “radical” or “outside the mainstream.”

However, there is a cost to be paid in all fundamentalisms. “Every worldview locates the individual. Put differently, every worldview provides an identity.... This identity is intended to be taken for granted, to be invested with self-evident validity.... The individual now *is*, or (in the case of the convert) *becomes*, what he or she is supposed to be” (p 86). But what of those who do not desire, for whatever reason (good, bad, or indifferent) to belong to any fundamentalist *in group*? To these, fundamentalism becomes a threat to freedom because of its attempts to “convert,” impose, or otherwise coerce others to accept the traditional taken-for-granted view. “Fundamentalism, religious or

secular, is always an enemy to freedom” (p 86). Attempts to create solidarity based on coerced uniformity of beliefs and values... [and] undermine the cohesion of society which creates a ‘balkanized’ society. Then the costs are born by everybody. “The final outcome may be all-out civil strife, between radicalized subcultures and the majority society, and/or between/among the several subcultures themselves” (p 86). This is almost prescient as it describes the current state-of-affairs in America’s larger culture and its religious subcultures. Is not our culture fragmented in ways it never used to be? And is not the religious subculture not also equally divided with its multiple denominations and sects? And what is to be said of the more conservative Christian subculture? So Berger observes that, “If the danger of relativism to a stable society is an excess of doubt, the danger of fundamentalism is a deficit of doubt. Both extreme uncertainty and extreme certainty are dangerous, though not equally so.... It follows that one ought to establish a middle position, equidistant from relativism and fundamentalism” (p 87).

Chapter Five marks the arrival at the heart of this book. It is titled “Certainty and Doubt.” Recalling the 17th century Pascal and his well-known remark, i.e., that what is truth on one side of the Pyrenees may be error on the other side, Berger reminds us that truth and error are often a function of one’s location in space and time. If you were born and raised in a Muslim country, your certain truth will be Islam. If you were born in an Asian country, your certain truth would likely be something like Buddhism. If you were born in America, and given that our culture values intellectual freedom, your certain truth could be any one of the many faiths expressed in the US. However, Berger asks – are there universal absolute truths? His answer is – yes, but what kind of truth are we discussing? Surely there are absolute truths like mathematical truths (e.g., $6 \times 2 = 12$). There are also rational truths that are derived from logic (e.g., syllogisms such as “Human beings are mortal; Socrates is a human being; therefore Socrates is mortal”). But Berger adds, “none of this addresses the truth and certainty we’re longing for in everyday life. Life isn’t a sum of formal syllogisms but an often painful succession of choices and decisions pertaining to alternatives that aren’t at all ‘rational,’ nor are the choices and decisions ‘logical.’.... Truth is perpetually overshadowed by doubt and insecurity. Only the ‘true believer’ who has settled down in one or the other religious or philosophical ‘-ism’ will shout down the voices of doubt – voices that, as we saw before, are multiple in the ongoing pluralization process of modernization” (p 92).

So, modernization and its pluralizing effects has produced a multiculturalism wherein “millions of people who straddle two, and often more than two, cultures” (p 93). The reality today is that the world has become a veritable shopping mall of ideas and ways to interpret the world and the very nature of truth itself. We live in world of multiple “isms.” Further, these “isms” become “gods” as it were that demand one’s loyalty. This results in “true believers” who prefer a world of what Berger calls “premodern certainties,” whether these take the form of religious fundamentalism or scientific

rationalism on the one hand or an anything goes relativism on the other. In both cases, “Neither position is plagued by doubt, they have that in common” (p 94). Sometimes even when these “gods” fail, when their promises or prophecies do not come to pass, true believers will remain loyal. A secular example would be Communism. It should not surprise us that many Russian people, especially older ones, are wishing for the return of a by-gone era and the return of the old Soviet Union. A recent example out of the religious world would be Harold Camping and his doomsday prediction of the May 21, 2011 return of Jesus. He was subsequently required to change the date to October 21, 2011. We are still here and he and his followers are still making predictions. These ideas failed because historical events falsified them. In each such case, doubt never gains a foothold. So, Berger observes, “Religious and secular fundamentalists and their opponents have engaged in bitter controversies throughout recorded history. Though these groups are diverse, they typically share three main characteristics: First, they have difficulty listening to opposing opinions and ideas. Second, they claim to possess an irrefutable truth (whether religious or secular). Third, they claim that their truth is the *only* truth; in other words, they have a monopoly on truth” (pp 96-97). History is laced with the struggle between certitude and doubt. An older and traditional example from the theological world would be the wrestling between Calvinists and Arminians. At one point in history this matter became so intense and “nasty” that it included the assassinations of “non-believers.” This reviewer is a committed Calvinist, at one point too certain of its systematic and absolute truth. But my position as a theology teacher required that I keep revisiting this issue. As I studied more I was forced to the conclusion that the biblical data is mixed and offers materials sufficient to sustain both views. Presently, as scholarship has established the validity of both positions, a middle ground has developed so that the unpleasantness has been diminished and a relative “peace” prevails. I remain a Calvinist but acknowledge that those of an Arminian perspective have a point and are not outside the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy or otherwise bad people. On-going study of the Bible created some doubt in my mind that caused me to back off the certitude of my previous view. In other words, testing, being forced to test my own view caused doubt. This paved the way for a less dogmatic position. More recently, Christians who are creationists (I am one of these) and secular hard scientists/evolutionists could learn a lot from each other...if they would only listen, adopt some intellectual humility, be willing to test themselves, perhaps create a little tension and doubt as a way to grow their faith to a *more thoughtful and reasonable faith*.

This brings Berger to the question – “What, then, is doubt? Berger notes that there are superficial and profound forms of doubt. Superficial doubt might occur when one is trying to decide whether to eat a delicious desert after a sumptuous meal. A more profound doubt may occur as one is deciding on an issue like legalizing euthanasia. Then there is the cynic, “who sublimates doubt into a mode of thinking and style of life. According to the cynic, everything and everybody must be constantly subjected to

doubt, since nobody can be held to be true and trustworthy” (p 104). Then there is “playful doubt” that is expressed in jests, banter and irony (pp 104-105). “In short, one can doubt big and important, or small and unimportant things. One can harbor doubts about oneself, the world at large, or God” (p 105). Doubt is most often a “middle ground” between knowledge and belief, especially in the areas of religious/philosophical thought, say “between religious belief and unbelief on the one hand and knowledge and ignorance on the other. These two opposites are, in fact, interrelated... Knowledge can foster unbelief, and ignorance can foster belief or faith” (p 106). Berger adds that doubt is “a basic uncertainty that isn’t prepared to let itself be crushed by belief or unbelief, knowledge or ignorance” (p 106).

The next question becomes – can doubt exist without falling into relativism? The answer seems to be “yes” as long as certain prerequisites are heeded (pp 116-119). These prerequisites must include, 1) *A differentiation between the core of the position and more marginal components.* Every worldview has a set of defining doctrines. These need to be maintained and defended where possible. However, all worldviews also accrue to themselves over time a host of peripheral matters or “doctrines” that are quite ancillary and debatable, therefore relatively unimportant and non-essential. For example, it seems that the doctrine of the Triune Godhead is of much more importance to Christian orthodoxy than is single immersion for baptism. 2) *An openness to the application of modern historical scholarship to one’s own tradition.* For example, the more we know *about* the Scriptures and their formation the more we can know *of* the Scriptures and *how* to interpret them. We should have no fear of scholarship if we do our homework and engage it thoughtfully. 3) *A rejection of relativism to balance out the rejection of fundamentalism.* Berger rightly warns that an uncontrolled relativism will always lead to an “anything goes” world, both cognitively and morally. If absolute truth doesn’t exist then every position, including one’s own, become arbitrary. Yet “fundamentalisms” can change also. There was once a fundamental notion of a flat earth or that the planets revolved around the earth. 4) *The acceptance of doubt as having a positive role in a particular community of belief.* A recognition of the limitations of the human intellect, coupled with a theological understanding of the effects of the Genesis fall had on human knowing, should lead to a basic humility in what humans claim to know and what we can actually know for certain. 5) *A definition of the “others,” those who don’t share one’s worldview, that doesn’t categorize them as enemies.* Outside of the context of an actual shooting war, those who have philosophically different points of view are not our “enemies.” They just interpret the world differently, and perhaps even wrongly. But we must learn to accept their presence and live with and engage them in a civil manner. 6) *The development and maintenance of institutions of civil society that enable peaceful debate and conflict resolution.* In a classically liberal democratic state, freedom of thought and association are guaranteed. The institutions of society should perpetuate these freedoms and more – they should encourage the civic engagement of all issues and

facilitate, where possible, “middle positions” that sustain a civil society. Finally, 7) *The acceptance of choice, not only as an empirical fact but as a morally desirable one*. Choice is a featured characteristic in a democratic state. One should be free to choose their religious, moral, or lifestyle beliefs until such beliefs lead to activities that *injures others*, in which cases that state must assert itself and prohibit such beliefs and associated activities. There is in moral/ethical theory a principle called “The Principle of Reversibility.” This principle states that whatever rule one chooses to adopt for the society in which one lives, must be willing to have the rule applied to themselves as well. So, for example, if you prefer a rule or law that proscribes someone’s activities, then *you* also must be willing to have the rule/law reversed and applied to you as well. In other words, you must be willing to live by your own rule even when it might not work to your advantage in a particular situation.

Chapter Six addresses “The Limits of Doubt.” This is perhaps the most complicated chapter in this book. Berger’s thesis in this chapter is that while doubt is a necessary and useful tool to inhibit bad judgments, doubt without limitations can also be disastrous to individuals as well as entire societies. He notes that “One of doubt’s primary functions is to defer judgment. Doubt is particularly opposed to hasty judgment, prejudgment, and prejudice” (p 121). On the other hand, “doubt should be doubted” (p 122). The reality is that in most situations in life, decisions need to be made, must be made. To postpone a choice is itself a choice that can end up in disastrous consequences such as “individual and collective paralysis” or “fruitless subjectivism” (p 122). Historically, there have been four ways that individuals and societies have arrived at certainty – *divine command, natural law, sociological functionality, and biological functionality*. Each of these is flawed in some way (pp 125-127). For example, assuming we could agree on which faith and which Holy Book is acceptable, religious certainty grounded in a faith and its book have proven both easy and disastrously deadly. Faith requires its god prove its exclusive legitimacy and holy books require interpretation and certain agreed to “proof texts” to sanction behaviors. “True believers” can easily find texts that approve their preferred activities while to non-believers this avenue is automatically foreclosed on two grounds – they do not accept religious faith as a way to determine morality nor do they acknowledge the book that teaches that faith. Natural law affirms that moral principles are written on human hearts everywhere. Really? If so, then why, for example, has the sacrifice of infants to some deity been practiced since the earliest days of the Old Testament? Or, if the dignity of human beings is affirmed as one of the highest goods, why is there such disagreement over the issue of human torture? Or, if natural law is to define acceptable human sexual relationships, how are we to come to terms with now proven genetic/hormonal disorders that have produced an entire class of people called “transgendered”?

Even though Berger suggests that the Natural Law option is somewhat unpersuasive, he presents a modified version. “*We would suggest a different way of legitimating moral*

*certainty: Such certitude is based on a historically developing perception of what it means to be human, which once attained, implies universality. Put differently, The meaning of human dignity comes to be perceived at certain moments of history, however, once perceived, it transcends these moments and is assumed to be intrinsic to human beings always and everywhere. The direction we propose is arguably a variant of natural law theory” (p 127). A key concept in this citation is “developing perception.” Berger is saying that in the course of being socialized into a community or society, morality becomes “internalized in the consciousness of individuals” (p 127). He observes that often we think of conscience in the imperative mood (sanctioned activities vs prohibited activities; do this, don’t do that). What we should be doing is conceiving of conscience in the indicative mood (take a look at this or take a look at that). “In other words” he says, “conscience induces specific perceptions. These can be both positive and negative” (p 127). Conscience produces specific takes or perceptions. So, for example, having to truly wrestle with an issue like slavery or torture, people will develop perceptions of what it means to be human, to have human dignity. Then the discipline of philosophical anthropology helps establish the components of human nature and also creates the language for discussing the issues. Along the way societal values are developed which end in setting in place the norms of moral behavior (pp 130-132). All of this process is couched in another phenomenon – *reciprocity*. Rather than couched in something metaphysical and abstract like “nature” or the commands of a “deity,” reciprocity can be empirically observed in the interactions of people in a society – how people interact and what they come to learn about themselves and others.*

As an illustration, Berger observes how this might work in a teacher-student context: “It gets more complicated. In reciprocal interactions...we internalize the role or attitude of the others, and in so doing we direct our thoughts, emotions, and actions not only toward others “outside” ourselves, but also toward *ourselves* in the internalized role of the other. In other words, we experience an *internalized* reciprocity. Take the interaction between a teacher and her students as an example. The teacher addresses the students sitting before her in the classroom. She talks to *them*, but at the same time she takes the role of a student and addresses *herself* in the internalized role of a student. The same happens within her students, who assume the role of the teacher and address themselves in that internalized role. Reciprocity is thus a mutual taking/internalizing of the role/attitude of the other. It’s in this way that meaning (and thus mutual understanding) can emerge in interactions. These interactions are then more than behavioral moments, they’re meaningful exchanges that can be given names. In the example above, we speak of ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ and of understandable roles like ‘teacher’ and ‘student’ (pp 133-134).

Then, reciprocity makes it possible to create empathy for others (p 134). So, Berger’s conclusion is that morality is grounded in human nature as a constant. This is the so-

called natural law argument (pp 135-136). This could be taken as a modified and secularized version of the “Golden Rule.” However, it seems that the theological doctrine of human depravity might also mitigate this “natural law.” On the other hand, it is also true that the more deeply we get to know the “other,” the less likely to misunderstand them and wish evil upon them.

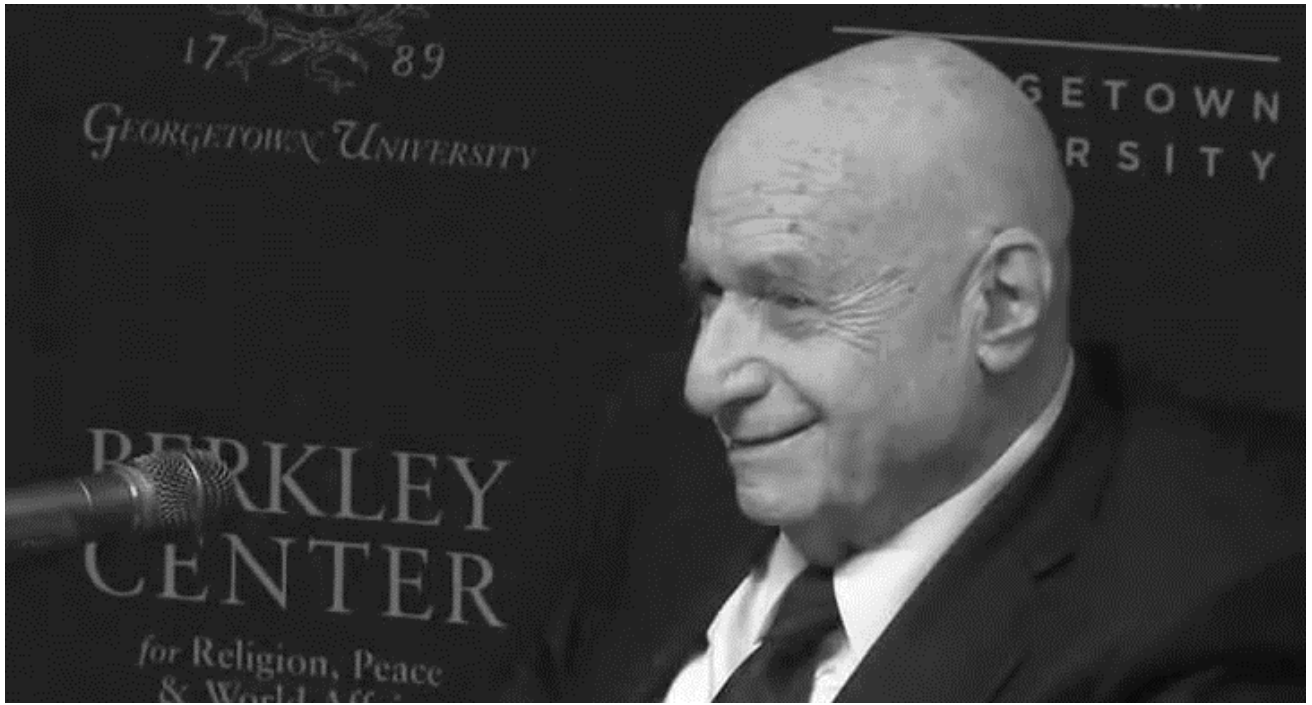
The last section to this chapter is a kind of transition setup for chapter seven. “It’s a commonplace of democratic discourse that all beliefs should be protected, except where they advocate or practice assaults on the rights of others. But doubt is a vulnerable and risky thing. It too must be protected against those who would repress it in the name of this or that alleged certainty. We believe that liberal democracy, with a constitution and legal system that protect the freedom to dissent, offers the best system in which doubt can be defended and may even flourish” (p 142). Tyrannical systems thrive when doubt and dissent are threatened or prohibited. Doubt is at the heart of a constitutional democracy and the element which makes a democracy work. This is why ideological purists are a threat to democracy. They cannot abide dissent. On the other hand, when democracy becomes “*democratism*” and attempts to impose its perspective and will on other societies, especially those that strike us as pre-modern (e.g., many Muslim and African cultures) and which are not prepared for the disorderly and messy give-and-take of a democracy, democracy becomes the problem.

Chapter Seven is titled “The Politics of Moderation.” Earlier in his book, Berger said that “If doubt were to come to a final and absolute rest, democracy itself would come to an end – there would remain nothing to be debated! It’s in this public space created by systematic political doubt that our civil liberties and constitutional rights are safeguarded. In sum, democracy is unthinkable without sincere and consistent doubt” (p 113). In this chapter Berger calls for what he calls the “politics of moderation.” He defines this as “a balance between a core certainty and many possibilities of action, none of which has the quality of certainty” (p 150). The core certainty in a democracy is the freedom of thought and action and the rights of individuals. This freedom is a *positive freedom* “to act creatively in all spheres of life” (p 150). This is not a negative freedom that means freedom *from all* restraints whatsoever, nor is it a positive freedom that converts itself into untrammelled individualism. Rather it is a freedom to think and act creatively to solve a problem. In a liberal democracy it means freedom *from* slavery to *ideological purity*. It means to engage the societal dialogue on this issue or that, being prepared to negotiate differences and arrive at an agreeable compromise that promotes the good of the whole and moves the country forward.

Conclusion. At the outset I asked the reader to not pre-judge this book or this review, to stay with me through to the end. We are at the end so now you can make your judgment. For my part I found this book provocative, stimulating, and helpful, though at times challenging. Berger’s thesis is that secularism is not the problem of the modern life

in America. Our country, though clearly existing from its beginning within a Christian “presence,” has always been dominated by secular ideals. The problem has been modernization, which is really an unavoidable phenomenon. History, and the history of modernized nations, always moves forward and becomes more diverse and complicated. That is the very nature of on-going history and cultural development. Certainty and doubt seem to function in a continuing cycle or “revolving door” kind of circumstance. At any given point in history there are some “certainties” that can be identified. Then history moves forward with its new developments...and doubt creeps in to challenge those certainties. Generations come and go, research happens, scholarship improves, we learn more, technology changes things (these days, radically so as a simple computer search will give you access to anything you want to investigate), and sometimes we learn we were wrong in our original assessments. Of particular interest to me as a teacher of the Bible and theology is how biblical scholarship is growing and improving. We now “know” much more about the Bible than a couple of generations ago. And the more we come to know about the Bible, the more accurately we know the Bible and how to best interpret it and develop our theology. This requires that, in humility and intellectual integrity, we alter (perhaps even forsake) some former certainties and form new ones. This places a burden on us all as individual believers to keep informing ourselves. This places a *tremendous burden* on those who do biblical studies and theology for their professional work (pastors, teachers, and scholarly researchers) to do their work in such a way as to not *miss*-inform or otherwise *miss*-direct their constituencies. This is what makes James 3:1 such a powerful caution to those who function in some vocational ministry. May God help us all to sprinkle in some healthy doubt as a way of challenging ourselves to be sure we have it right. Are there certainties in life? Surely there are. But are we certain we have got them all correct at this point in time? Hmmmm.

Skip Forbes, June, 2012



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