Epistemological modesty

"There is a middle ground between fanaticism and relativism."

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For several decades sociologist Peter Berger has been one of the most interesting writers on religion and modern society. Perhaps best known for his text on the sociology of religion, The Sacred Canopy, *Berger has also shown a keen interest in issues of development and public policy and in the nature of religious belief in the modern world, as evident in* A Far Glory: The Question of Faith in an Age of Credulity *(1992) and in his most recent book,* Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience. *For the past 12 years he has been on the faculty of Boston University and director of BU's Institute for the Study of Economic Culture. We talked with him recently about the work of the institute, the state of civil society, and theological alternatives in contemporary life.*

What does it mean to study "economic culture"?

Our institute's agenda is relatively simple. We study the relationship between social-economic change and culture. By culture we mean beliefs, values and lifestyles. We cover a broad range of issues, and we work very internationally. I'm fanatical about very few things, but one of them is the usefulness and importance of cross-national studies. Even if one is interested only in one’s own society, which is one's prerogative, one can understand that society much better by comparing it with others.

Clearly one of the most interesting questions in such an investigation is the relationship between capitalism and democracy. In some of the center's literature one can find these claims: "Capitalist development is a necessary prerequisite of democracy," and “The marketplace is a stalking horse for democracy." Could you explain the argument behind those claims?

It has been true in Western societies and it seems to be true elsewhere that you do not find democratic systems apart from capitalism, or apart from a market economy, if you prefer that term. The relationship doesn't work symmetrically: there are capitalist societies that are not democratic. But we don't have an example of a democratic society existing in a socialist economy—which is the only real alternative to capitalism in the modern world. So I think one can say on empirical grounds—not because of some philosophical principle—that you can't have democracy unless you have a market economy.

Now the more interesting question is, Why? I don't think there's a tremendous mystery here. The modern state, even the modern democratic state, is enormously powerful. If to all the enormous power that the state has anyway you add the power to run the economy, which is what socialism empirically means, the tendency toward creating some sort of totalitarianism becomes extremely strong. And then the individual has no escape from the reach of the state.

In a market economy, however, the individual has some possibility of escaping from the power of the state. Let's say you're a politically suspect figure and have just been fired from a government job. With a market economy there's always the possibility that you can be hired in your uncle's factory out in the provinces. It's along those lines one has to think of the relationship between the economic system and democracy.

The market appears to be a necessary but not sufficient condition of democracy. Do you also see the capitalist marketplace generating forces that propel a society toward democracy?

This question is, of course, acutely raised these days by the case of China. I don't think we know the answer. Let me say again that the relationship is asymmetrical: there's no democracy without a market economy, but you can have a market economy without democracy.

If you say simply that pressures toward democracy are created by the market, I would say yes. Even in a society as tightly controlled as Singapore's, the market creates certain forces which perhaps in the long run may lead to democracy. The market creates a middle class, for example, which sooner or later becomes politically uppity. The middle class doesn't like to be regulated, so it creates institutions which have a certain independence. And businesses need security of

contract and some notion of property rights, so they generate a judiciary which is at least somewhat separate from the government. Private associations and a stock exchange emerge, and there is a need for public accountants. So I think you can argue, along these lines, that capitalism introduces certain institutional forces which put counterpressure on a really all-embracing dictatorial state.

But whether those forces inexorably lead to democracy is another question. On that point I would be cautious. Some people think that as the Chinese economy becomes more and more capitalistic it will inevitably become more democratic. Hence the *Wall Street Journal* takes the position that the best way to open up China politically is to have as many capitalist dealings with it as possible. I think this is far from certain. It may turn out to be true, it may not.

It appears that with the much-touted globalization of the economy and the global movement of capital, Americans are moving into a new kind of economic culture of their own. Is that true?

There's no question that we have an increasingly integrated world economy, and that this has very serious implications, socially and politically We also have a cultural phenomenon: the emergence of a global culture, or of cultural globalization.

We recently studied a concrete example of this in the U.S. when we examined the role of business in the racial integration of Atlanta. Businesses, led by Coca-Cola, played a very positive role in moving Atlanta from being a rigidly segregated city, dominated by a small white elite, to being a city with a significant group of black political leaders. The fact that the business community wanted Atlanta to be a player in the global economy was very helpful in this move. Business leaders wanted Atlanta to be thought of as a new global city, not a magnolia-scented Old South city. This was reflected in their slogan, "Atlanta, the city too busy to hate."

Well, it didn't exactly work out that way. The city still has serious racial and social problems. But the effort was relatively successful. It certainly helped create a big and flourishing black middle class. There was a rather dramatic change in economic culture which most of us would probably regard in a positive light.

The negative side to globalization is that it wipes out entire economic systems and in doing so wipes out the accompanying culture. When certain branches of the economy become obsolete, as in the case of the steel industry, not only do jobs disappear, which is obviously a terrible social hardship, but certain cultures also

disappear.

The increased mobility of jobs and capital would seem to exacerbate another trend that worries observers of American life: the weakening of civil society. People seem less inclined these days to commit themselves to local forms of community—voluntary associations, church groups—that traditionally have formed the fabric of our culture. Do you share those concerns?

I would share those concerns if I shared the empirical assumptions behind them. But I'm a little skeptical. The best-known argument of this sort is made by Robert Putnam in his article "Bowling Alone." I'm sure Putnam is right that there's been a decline in certain kinds of organizations like bowling leagues. But people participate in communities in other ways. Two studies have come out of our institute that are relevant to this question. One is Nancy Ammerman's book *Congregations and Community,* which concludes that at least as far as organized religion is concerned, Putnam's thesis doesn't seem very plausible. People are very active participants in congregations.

The other study of ours is by Robert Wuthnow, who talks about "porous institutions." It's true that people don't participate in organizations the way they used to—they participate in less organized ways and move from one to another. But that doesn't mean they don't participate or that there's been a decline in social capital.

Certainly there are some factors that Putnam looks at which are realistic. Many civic organizations were once run by middle-class women—married women who didn't work and had time to do volunteer work. With more and more women in the labor force, the population of volunteers has shrunk. But again I would say that it's the mode of participation that has changed, not the fact of participation.

In some ways you started the discussion about the health of civil society two decades ago when you and Richard John Neuhaus wrote *To Empower People,* which highlighted the importance of "mediating structures"—by which you meant institutions like schools, labor unions and churches.

Yes, the concept of mediating structures or intermediating institutions covers more or less the same ground as civil society. I would say with regard both to civil society and to mediating structures that one should not romanticize these. Perhaps when Richard Neuhaus and I wrote that little book over 20 years ago we were

romanticizing a little bit. Some intermediate structures are good for social order and for meaningful lives and some are bad.

Take the Ku Klux Klan, for example. Strictly speaking, it's a mediating structure. But you wouldn't want to say it's a good thing. The same could be said about civil society. Some kinds of civil society can be dreadful. You have to ask about the values that animate the institutions of civil society.

The analogy that occurred to me fairly recently is to cholesterol. Doctors used to think that cholesterol was bad for you—period. Then they began to distinguish between good and bad cholesterol. I think we have to distinguish between good and bad mediating structures. That means examining the values these institutions foster. If they foster racial hatred, then they're like bad cholesterol. If they foster dialogue between different groups, cohesion, value transmission, then they're good cholesterol.

Related to the concern about civil society is a concern about a rampant individualism in the U.S., the prevalence of an "autonomous" self. Some commentators fear that Americans have lost the ability to commit themselves to causes or institutions that take people beyond the ideal of individual preference. This concern has given rise to the communitarian movement in political thought. What is your view of the situation?

One has to consider what is correct about this analysis and what is doubtful. What is correct is that modern Western societies are more individualistic than either premodern Western societies or societies in other parts of the world. It's correct that you can have an excess of individualism, whereby people have no social ties whatsoever except perhaps to their immediate family and have no sense of the common good or obligations to the larger community. And it's certainly true that if there are too many of such people, the result is bad for society.

But the assumption made by Robert Bellah and to some extent most of the people who call themselves communitarians is that community in America has been falling apart. Which takes us back to Putnam's thesis, which I think is empirically questionable. It's amazing to what extent Americans do in fact participate in every kind of community you can imagine—and give money and time and so on. The people Bellah interviewed in his own book *Habits of the Heart* seem to indicate this, though Bellah interprets their remarks in terms of anomie and desperate aloneness.

In fact, many of them are engaged in communal activities of one sort or another.

I don't think Americans are all that individualistic. Tocqueville understood that Americans are fundamentally associational—that this is the genius of American life. He also saw that the negative side of associational life is conformism. Americans are much more conformist than, for example, the French or the Italians. Which is hardly a sign that we are hyperindividualistic.

I wrote a commentary about two years ago on "furtive smokers" and what they tell us about American conformism. Though about one-fourth of American adults smoke, they've offered virtually no resistance to the anti-smoking campaign. Like obedient subjects of the emperor, smokers now stand shivering in the cold to smoke their cigarettes. That's not the sign of an individualistic culture. Its the behavior of a highly conformist and authority-prone culture. (The authority in this case is not that of the state but the peer group, or public opinion.)

One of the issues that you've written about over the years is secularization. Scholarly opinion has gone through some changes on this topic. What is your sense of whether and how secularization is taking place?

I think what I and most other sociologists of religion wrote in the 1960s about secularization was a mistake. Our underlying argument was that secularization and modernity go hand in hand. With more modernization comes more secularization. It wasn't a crazy theory. There was some evidence for it. But I think it's basically wrong. Most of the world today is certainly not secular. It’s very religious. So is the U.S. The one exception to this is Western Europe. One of the most interesting questions in the sociology of religion today is not, How do you explain fundamentalism in Iran? but, Why is Western Europe different?

The other exception to the falsification of the secularization thesis is the existence around the world of a thin layer of humanistically educated people—a cultural elite. I was recently a consultant on a study of 11 countries that examined what we called "normative conflicts"—basic conflicts about philosophical and moral issues. We found in most countries a fundamental conflict between the elite culture and the rest of the population. Many of the populist movements around the world are born out of a resentment against that elite. Because that elite is so secular, the protests take religious forms. This is true throughout the Islamic world, it's true in India, it's true in

Israel, and I think it's true in the U.S. One can't understand the Christian Right and similar movements unless one sees them as reactive—they're reacting to what they call secular humanism. Whether "secular humanism" is the right term or not, these people are reacting to an elite culture.

Here again, the U.S. is very similar to much of the world.

Do you see any signs that the U.S. is moving toward the Western European style of secularization?

If the cultural elite has its way, the U.S. will be much more like Europe. On church-state matters, the federal courts, since the decision on prayer in the public schools, have been moving in what broadly speaking is the French direction—moving toward a government that is antiseptically free of religious symbols rather than simply a government that doesn't favor any particular religious group. Insofar as that view has sedimented itself in public education, the media and therapeutic centers, then I would say there are Europeanizing pressures. But in the U.S., unlike any Western European country, there is enormous popular resistance to this trend, especially from evangelical Christians, who after all comprise about 40 million or so, which is a lot of people. Whether that resistance will eventually weaken or not, I can't predict.

In your own writings you've made it clear that you are a member of that elite at least in the sense that certain theological certitudes are not open to you. You have placed yourself in the tradition of liberal theology that looks for "signals of transcendence," to use the term you employed in A *Rumor of Angels.* How do your read those signals today?

I haven't changed my theological position, really, since I wrote *A Rumor of Angels.* In my early youth I was sort of a neo-orthodox fanatic of a Lutheran variety. I don't think I was a fanatic in a personally disagreeable way, but intellectually I was. And then I got out of that. Since *Rumor of Angels* the only reasonable way I can describe myself theologically is as part of a liberal Protestant tradition.

My most recent book—*Redeeming Laughter,* about the comic in human life—takes up directly from where I ended in *A Rumor of Angels,* referring to humor as one of the signals of transcendence. I think it's a very important signal. To talk of signals of transcendence betrays a liberal position, for it excludes almost by definition any kind of orthodox certainty. If you are certain in terms of the object of your religious belief, you don't need any signals—you've already got the whole shebang. This is the only

position I've found it possible to hold with intellectual honesty, and I doubt that is going to change.

How does the comic send a signal of transcendence?

The comic is a kind of island experience. For example, if I now told you a joke or you told me a joke, we would immediately signal to one another that this is not to be taken seriously. We'll say, "This is a joke —have you heard the latest?" Or we may even signal it with our body language. And then we laugh, and for the moment the serious world is suspended. And then we say, "But now, seriously," and we go back to our so-called serious business.

The clown shows this island experience very well. Nothing can happen to the clown. He always gets up again. He is hit over the head, it doesn't hurt him. He has a pratfall, he jumps up again. He's magically invulnerable. We know that that's not the real world. The clown comedy appears as an island of safety and well-being in a world that we know very well is neither safe nor conducive in the end to our well-being. Now that experience has a strange similarity to religion. Religious experience is also an en-clave.

A purely secular interpretation of reality would say, as many people have said, that this island experience of the comic is psychologically healthy (it's good for people to laugh), but that ultimately it's not serious. It's an escape. In Freudian terms, it's based on illusion (something Freud also said about religion).

In the perspective of religious faith there is what I call in the book an epistemological reversal The invulnerability of the clown is a symbol of a promised future in which, indeed, there will be no pain—which is the fundamental promise of any religious concept of redemption. In the perspective of faith, the comic is a symbol of a redeemed state of human being. It is, therefore, of great theological significance.

Can you move from this island experience of the comic toward some constructive notion of belief?

Well, I'm not suggesting one should build a theological system on the clown, though it s a tempting idea. I don't know if one can go much further than what I have said.

How do you, as a theological liberal, view the "postliberal" movement among mainline or liberal Protestants—the movement to recover their

theological identity and reimmerse themselves in the tradition and in the particular language and narrative of scripture?

The problem with liberal Protestantism in America is not that it has not been orthodox enough, but that it has lost a lot of religious substance. It has lost this in two different ways. One is through the psychologizing of religion, whereby the church becomes basically a therapeutic agency, and the other through the politicizing of religion, whereby the church becomes an agent of change, a political institution. Whatever the merits or demerits of either therapeutic or political activity, for religion these moves constitute digging your own grave, because there are other ways to get therapy and there are other ways to engage in politics.

I don't think it follows that what is needed is a return to orthodoxy. Some people seem to gravitate from one fundamentalism to another, from some kind of secular fundamentalism into a religious fundamentalism or the other way around, which is not very helpful. The history of Protestantism has shown that real faith, which has to do with God and Christ and redemption and resurrection and sin and forgiveness, is not just a psychological or a political activity, and also that you can have real faith without being in some sort of narrow orthodox mold. That is the challenge to liberal Protestantism.

Schleiermacher has always been a theological model not so much in the content of his thought as in his basic approach to faith, which is a very rational, historically oriented approach within a tradition, with the understanding that one cannot simply swallow the tradition but has to enter into a reasonable dialogue with it. In one of my books I call this the "heretical imperative'—you have to choose. No tradition can be taken for granted any more. To pretend that it can is, in most cases, a self-delusion.

Schleiermacher was lucky in that he still had a church with a strong religious substance with which he could enter into dialogue. In liberal Protestantism in America we are not so lucky. There is nothing much there to enter into dialogue with.

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.

My colleague Adam Seligman uses the term "epistemological modesty.” Epistemological modesty means that you believe certain things, but you're modest about these claims. You can be a believer and yet say, I'm not really sure. I think that is a fundamental fault line. I'm inclined to define theological liberalism in terms of being on one side of this fault line rather than in terms of any specific beliefs.