Peter Berger's rumors of transcendence

Berger seemed to want a liberal Protestantism with theological substance. But defining that substance was not his vocation.

by David Heim

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Peter Berger would have been amused by the headline over his obituary in the *New York Times*: "Theologian who fought 'God is dead' movement dies at 88." Berger never claimed to be a theologian, and was never the robust defender of faith against atheistic philosophy that the headline suggests. He relished (especially among the devout) being the cool, skeptical social scientist whose own theological commitments were tightly bracketed.

Berger did argue that secularization—the focus of much of his early work—was not as inexorable as he and other sociologists once believed, and that religious belief had proved itself surprisingly resilient in the modern world. Berger saw that for many people, a religiously pluralistic world is not necessarily a secular world.

Berger's main attempt at theological assertion was his slim but marvelous book *A Rumor of Angels*, but even there the argument is chiefly anthropological. The book highlights five aspects of human existence which are inexplicable apart from the positing of a transcendent reality. The human propensity to believe that the word is ordered in a trustworthy way, the capacity to play, the capacity to hope in the face of death, the conviction that some things are just wrong and must be condemned, and the capacity to laugh—all these, he said, are "signals of transcendence." These "prototypical human gestures" aren't supported by evidence, and they can't be justified intellectually, yet they seem deeply characteristic of human life.

A Rumor of Angels is wonderfully suggestive for anyone who thinks or preaches about matters of faith. Yet Berger, officially Lutheran, had little inclination himself to

go beyond “rumors” of transcendence or to link them explicitly to Christian doctrine or practice.

To argue for a transcendent realm from within the world of empirical experience was, Berger readily acknowledged, the classic move of liberal Protestantism. He always said that given his skepticism about the authority of church and doctrine, his only theological home was among liberal Protestants. Yet throughout his career Berger was relentlessly critical of liberal Protestants, who to his mind were always throwing away their theological treasure for the sake of superficial cultural relevance and vain political enthusiasms.

What Berger wanted, it seemed, was a liberal Protestantism with theological substance (and, of course, sociological shrewdness). But what exactly would a nondogmatic, experience-based theological substance look like, and how would it be shared or sustained? Berger tended to be diffident when pressed on such matters. That was not his vocation.

When I got a chance to interview Berger in 1997, I asked him what he thought about various “postliberal” efforts within liberalism to recover a robust theological identity based on scripture and liturgy. I gathered from his response that he was either unaware of these movements or just not that interested. Berger lamented that he was ecclesiastically and theologically homeless (he titled his 1990 contribution to the *Century*’s “How My Mind Has Changed” series “Reflections of an ecclesiastical expatriate”), but he also seemed temperamentally suited to it.

Theologian or not, Berger was at the center of mainline theological conversation, perhaps especially in the 1960s and 1970s. He was interested in using social research to inform social ethics, and he tackled the big questions about the shape of religion, ethics, and politics under conditions of modernity. For many people, myself included, he offered a clear, witty, and unforgettable introduction to these questions.

It was widely thought in those years that he would be appointed to a major position in Christian social thought at a place like Harvard Divinity School, where, at the heart of the liberal Protestant world, he would connect Christian tradition to social science. Perhaps for ideological reasons, that appointment never happened. That it didn’t was a loss to mainline Protestants, who could have used his intellectual firepower and prickly skepticism. I can’t help thinking it was also some kind of loss for Berger.

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