

Peter L. Berger, *Adventures of An Accidental Sociologist: How to Explain the World Without Becoming a Bore*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2011. 264 pages. \$26, cloth.

This book is an autobiographical endeavor. For the author, it is an account of his intellectual career, the issues dealt with and the people and adventures “encountered on the way” (7). The author is Peter L. Berger, a brilliant contemporary American “humanities-oriented” sociologist (and also lay theologian, social policy analyst, novelist, general social commentator, among other roles). A public intellectual blessed with both an engaging, lucid writing style and an ability to identify and analyze issues of major import, he is self-described as a theologically liberal Protestant and a politically and socially moderate conservative.

Berger was born in Austria in 1929 and emigrated to the United States eighteen years later. Within the discipline of sociology, Berger has made outstanding and permanent contributions in the areas of sociological theory (especially in the sociology of knowledge), the sociology of religion, modernization, and development in the least-industrialized societies. Despite this volume being billed as a work devoted to Berger’s career as a sociologist, it also—and as I will argue, necessarily—involves discussions of his work in theology, philosophy, literature, and social policy.

He terms himself an “accidental” sociologist because he originally took courses in sociology at the New School for Social Research as a means to introduce himself to American society to better prepare himself for a prospective career as a Lutheran minister. He soon discovered that his emerging and constantly reflective perspective on life precluded an orthodox attachment to any Christian or religious denomination. This led eventually to his theological work developing an “inductive” (or “experiential”) approach to religious affirmation searching for various “signals of transcendence,” an approach rejecting both the alternative options of accepting either a religiously orthodox “deductive” methodology or a religiously progressive “reductive” methodology. For Berger the first or deductive option entails an unwarranted “leap of faith” while the latter, reductive option, self-destructively collapses religion to purely this-worldly categories and concerns. Simultaneously, his constantly reflective perspective led Berger to an attitude which viewed a great deal of social life with its conventions—minus the indisputably great intellectual and ethical issues—as arbitrary, capricious, and, in his own words, as “precarious.” Such an attitude, stopping considerably short of the acceptance of antinomianism, goes hand in hand with his development of a sophisticated

“debunking” sociological perspective with its ability to pierce the fictions that undergird much of social life and to expose the vested material and status interests of ideologies, the latter legitimating the activities of organizations or individuals.

Much more than he is willing to admit, Berger’s core sense of self/character and his religious and sociological enterprises are intimately related and depend on one another in crucial ways. It is important to note that, on the next to last page in the book, Berger claims, in this reviewer’s judgment, a too-sharp separation between his innermost self, his religious commitment, and his professional identity as a sociologist (258). A Catholic scholar might respond to Berger by referencing Jacques Maritain’s claim in *The Peasant of the Garonne* that “between faith and reason, as between grace and nature, there is an essential distinction and one sometimes tends to lose sight of it. . . . But between faith and reason, as between grace and nature, there is no separation. One tends to overlook that too. . . . Things are that way, and so is life; there is distinction without separation” (1968: 166–67). Thus a Catholic sociologist would reject Berger’s advocacy of a Weberian and supposedly “value-free” sociology as defended in his co-authored volume, *Sociology Reinterpreted*. A Catholic sociological perspective would claim, to the contrary, that the mutually agreed upon goal of objectivity in social research requires both the introduction of a conceptual framework derived from, or consistent with, the natural law and, methodologically, the juxtaposition of competing frameworks as an aid in reaching a truthful and comprehensive analysis. (For more, see the introductory chapter in Joseph Varacalli, *Bright Promise, Failed Community* [2000].)

Partially because of his specific intellectual approaches to both religion and sociology, some (although certainly not all) in both mainstream religious and academic-sociological establishments view Berger as a “heretical” figure. On the other hand, for an academic, he deservedly has many admirers among the educated public, especially among those with interests in the vital issues part and parcel of the disciplines of theology, sociology, and social policy.

The book is important for its fascinating biographical details regarding Berger’s movement from one institution of higher education to another; the important intellectual and scholarly figures who crossed his path and, in many cases, with whom he collaborated and cultivated friendships; and the great issues of academic, religious, and moral import that he has addressed with intelligence and attempted honesty. It also provides a portal through which to see, during Berger’s biographical career, the unfortunate institutionalization within the sociological discipline of the twin pitfalls of

a positivism characterized by a methodological fetishism, and, conversely, of an uncritical and unreasonable acceptance of ideological and utopian thinking, almost always of a radical left-wing nature—a development as uncongenial to a Catholic sociology as it is to Berger’s own debunking sociological perspective.

Although not its focus, the book also raises an issue of defining importance to advocates of the idea of a Catholic sociology, i.e., the relationship between sociology and, respectively, the metaphysical realms of theology and philosophy, on the one hand, and politics/social policy, on the other. Berger is methodologically a quintessentially Lutheran “two kingdoms” theological thinker, philosophically Kantian, and sociologically an advocate of a Weberian-like “dual citizenship” between the realms of sociology and politics/social policy. He rejects, as such, the Catholic answer to the relationship between these realms which would argue, again following Maritain, that while there is a distinction there is no absolute separation between these disciplinary spheres and, moreover, that the realms are in a mutually influencing and interdependent relationship. Put another way, rejecting the typically Catholic integrationist, sacramental, and incarnational orientation, Berger embraces a Protestant-like “either/or” way of thinking as compared to a Catholic-like “both/and” logic. For instance, a proposed exercise—that can’t be pursued here—for someone with a Catholic sensibility would be to demonstrate how Berger’s classic analysis in the sociology of religion, *The Sacred Canopy*, is both distinct but not yet separated from his influential theological and philosophical anthropological speculations in *A Rumor of Angels*.

The volume under review is also important in that it provides a model of an individual scholar who constantly addresses the crucial, ethically informed issues of the day, a model that should be of interest to all educated citizens, whether Catholic or not, concerned with the construction of a good society. Finally, and also of interest to Catholic scholars, is that the volume implicitly raises the issue of, at the very best, Berger’s unhappy evaluation of an orthodox Catholicism, the latter at base a “deductive” (although not exclusively so) intellectual enterprise and, derivatively, the implied rejection of the idea of Catholic perspectives in sociology/social science.

Berger received his Ph.D. in sociology from the New School for Social Research in 1954 after studying there under three great theoretically gifted European scholars: the Durkheimian Albert Salomon, the Weberian Carl Mayer, and the phenomenologist, Alfred Schutz. He served a brief stint in the military from 1953 to 1955. His first major academic appointment was at a branch campus of the University of North Carolina, fol-

lowed by an appointment at the Hartford Seminary. He came back to New York to teach as a full-time faculty member of the Graduate Faculty of the New School from 1963–1970, “the most productive years of my entire career” (79). He left the New School given its increased rejection of the tradition of a humanistic European sociology that he was both raised in and advocated. He found a temporary exile at Rutgers University from 1970 to 1979, moved to Boston College in 1981, and then settled in at Boston University under congenial terms offered by then president, John Silber. At Boston University, he taught in the departments of sociology and religion, and within the School of Theology as well as being affiliated with its University Professors Program. Very importantly, in 1985, he founded and started to direct the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs, with its focus on the cultural and religious concomitants of global economic activity. This Institute, “for the next 24 years . . . determined my work as a social scientist” (207). He retired as a full-time faculty member in 1999 and as director of the Institute in 2009, but still is active and productive as a University Professor Emeritus and with the Institute.

Some of Berger’s closest scholarly colleagues and confidants have been Thomas Luckmann, Brigitte Berger (his wife), Hansfried Kellner (his brother-in-law), Anton Zijerveld, and Richard Neuhaus. His relationship with Neuhaus cooled over a disagreement regarding the November 1996 issue of *First Things* questioning the legitimacy of the American regime because of its institutionalization of abortion. As Berger states, “I had been disturbed by . . . [the] increasingly dogmatic tone [of *First Things*] . . . following Neuhaus’s conversion to a very conservative Catholicism. . . . I should add that Neuhaus and I preserved our friendship until his recent death, but the old camaraderie could not be restored” (205). Berger, claiming a “moderate middle” high ground on many moral topics, proposes a “nuanced” position on the topic of abortion (201) and has other disagreements with a Catholic worldview on such issues as homosexuality, divorce, and pre-marital co-habitation (202).

A few of Berger’s many accomplished students include John Murray Cuddihy, James D. Hunter, and Michael Plekon. He has also collaborated with such internationally renowned scholars as Samuel P. Huntington and Grace Davies, among many others. He has published an incredibly large number of important books, articles, commentaries, and book reviews. Among his most important books are *Invitation to Sociology*; *The Social Construction of Reality* (co-authored); *The Homeless Mind* (co-authored); *The War Over the Family* (co-authored); *The Heretical Imperative*; *The Capitalist Revolution*; *Many Globalizations* (co-edited); and *Religious America, Secular Europe* (co-authored).

Berger has applied his sociological analysis to a wide range of substantive topics. One is the issue of secularization where he has reversed himself. He now argues that while “modernity produces pluralism . . . pluralism does not necessarily produce secularity. . . . What it does produce . . . is a situation in which no worldview is any longer taken-for-granted so that individuals have to *choose* among the different worldviews on offer” (99). He informs the reader that his edited volume, *The Desecularization of the World*, represents “my own sharpest retraction of my early work on secularization” (234). Part and parcel of this intellectual reformulation involves his study of the worldwide explosion and growth of Pentecostalism. Among many other topics that he has grappled with are globalization, the relationship between relativism and fundamentalism in modern society, and the comparison of the consequences both materially, i.e., a “calculus of pain,” and spiritually, a “calculus of meaning” (142) for any developing society in accepting either a capitalist or socialist economy. Regarding this latter issue, Berger has moved away from his position in *Pyramids of Sacrifice* in which he depicted both capitalist and socialist options as being equally unacceptable in their own ways. His present position, derived empirically, in part, from his study of the “economic miracles” of the “Four Little Dragons” of East Asia—South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore (142)—and presented in *The Capitalist Revolution*, is that capitalism is “the only viable model of development” (203).

Berger’s rejection of Catholicism is based primarily on his disavowal of any “deductive” method of religious affirmation. His emphasis on induction and experience, conversely, tends to move him to either repudiate or claim indifference to many issues involving religious doctrine. Since embracing liberal Lutheranism, Berger states that he “gave up any chance of becoming a fanatic of any description and that the only orthodoxy to which I continued to adhere was a Weberian understanding of the vocation of social science” (77). This raises the possibility that Berger, unfortunately, equates any form of religious orthodoxy with fanaticism/fundamentalism, thus ignoring psychologist Gordon Allport’s crucial distinction between an unreflective “immature” and “extrinsic” religiosity versus a “mature” or “intrinsic” religiosity, the latter viewing reason and faith as mutually supporting—the official stance of the Catholic Church. Put another way, there are many more options that stand between fundamentalism and relativity than his own version of liberal Protestantism which, by the way, posits its own authority in the form of an “ideology of individualism.”

Berger seemingly rejects the reality of the natural law, stating, “this seductive idea is empirically untenable. No matter what moral conviction

one wants to cite, there have been many cultures in which this conviction cannot be found” (250). Thus does Berger throw a gauntlet in the face of earlier Catholic anthropologists and sociologists who have argued the perennial reality of the natural law, but who take into account that some cultures may come close to smothering it, that it can be found entangled within a cultural matrix of social constructions of reality devoid of its presence, and that many individuals may be only dimly aware of its imperatives or do not have the courage to act upon what they know is the correct course of action. The call here is for contemporary Catholic social scientists to pick up the banner of earlier Catholic scholars like Jacques Leclercq (*Marriage and the Family*) and Carle C. Zimmerman (*Family and Civilization*). Of ironic note here is the lament of Berger and Luckmann (95–96) that their social constructionist paradigm was distorted and abused by the nihilism and dysfunctional perspectives generated by what was then a left-wing counterculture in America starting in the late 1960s. The question is, why were Berger and Luckmann surprised? Their sociological theory, after all, did not attempt to incorporate anything equivalent to the natural law or universal norm analysis. For perspectives in the sociology of knowledge that do attempt to incorporate such a metaphysical dimension, see the formulations of scholars like Max Scheler (*Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge*) and Werner Stark (*The Sociology of Knowledge*).

Much in a Bergerian sociology is compatible with a Catholic sociology. Both are interdisciplinary in nature, incorporating history, philosophy, and literature. Both share an “actionist” perspective positing the essential freedom and responsibility of the individual. Both are sociologies that desire to contribute to a more humane society, promoting what the Church might call a fundamental “solidarity” between individuals, groups, and nations. Berger’s social policy advocacy in his co-authored work, *To Empower People*, of “mediating structures” that “stand between individual life and the mega-structures of modern society, notably the state, the economy, and other vast bureaucracies” (150) shares a fundamental affinity with the Catholic principle of *subsidiarity*. Finally, and although Berger dismisses the metaphysical existence of the natural law, his sociological analysis claims to produce empirically based, historical “perceptions” (e.g., “the slave as a human being,” 251) that correlate with the universal claims of the law written into the heart. Indeed, in a quick and intriguing aside, Berger admits that his inductive analysis “might be interpreted as a *sort* of natural law theory” (251), albeit, I might add, a very “thin” one. This conclusion and logic holds as well for Berger’s theological speculations regarding the search for various “signals of transcendence” to be found within common human experience. In short, at times, Berger writes better than he knows.

Enough has been provided, hopefully, to convince the readership of the *Catholic Social Science Review* of the importance, relevance, and various contributions of Peter L. Berger. Hopefully, a Catholic-Bergerian exchange of views will continue into the indefinite future. One final and too obvious point: there is absolutely *nothing* “boring” about the man, his life, his writings, and the book under review!

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Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2010. 869 pages. \$20, paper.

I recently had the pleasure of reading two books that inspire human perfection. The first, *Washington: A Life* (2010), by Ron Chernow, is decidedly secular, but inspirational nonetheless. The other, *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* (1924), by Adolphe Tanqueray, S.S., D.D., is a treatise for those interested in advancing in the spiritual life.

The confluence of Washington’s biography and Tanqueray’s prescriptions for spiritual growth forced me to reflect anew on Jesus’ words, “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). This *Dominical* command is, in fact, the life project for every human being. In his classic work Tanqueray defines the three traditional stages of spiritual life—the *Purgative*, the *Illuminative*, and the *Unitive*—as steps toward perfection. But, like any worthwhile achievement, it takes effort, constant practice and supernatural grace.

Each person’s life is a mixture of the *human* and the *divine*. Even if, in our agnostic age, some doubt the supernatural aspect, it is through the interplay of nature and grace—our material attributes acted upon by the will of God—that we develop our character and strive for personal fulfillment. To grow in our humanity takes work. For one thing, we must come to grips with our motives, which are usually mixed. Often, for example, the quest for perfection gets all tangled up with desire for status or recognition, having others see us in a favorable light. And growing in character and spiritually requires us to take stock of ourselves—our virtues, our vices, and our ultimate goal—and then to make regular assessments of progress in achieving the hoped-for end (which, for believers is heaven) and it also requires, of course, prayer.