

Beyond Secularism

Facing Up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion,
by Peter L. Berger, *New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977. xix + 233 pp. \$11.50.*

PETER BERGER, a sociologist at Rutgers University, is not so much the author as he is the editor of this book—that is, the editor of his own writings. All but one of its eighteen chapters were originally published as essays in periodicals. Professor Berger has now collected them together, unrevised, and has added thirteen pages of introduction. This is unfortunate, not only because a few of the essays could stand some revision (like “The Blueing of America,” first published in 1971, which predicted that working-class youths would step into the key positions of power scorned by the sandal-making children of affluence), but also because it leads to an uneven thematic development. But I am determined to say no more about the flaws of this book, because there is so much more to say about its virtues. There may be unevenness in the development of its themes, but the themes are there for all to see.

Berger is a self-declared conservative, though his conservatism is broad enough to encompass elements of New Deal liberalism and New Left radicalism. If this seems to be carrying catholicity close to the border of incoherence, let me be more specific. Berger is a Christian, an apparently orthodox Lutheran, despite his claim to be “heretical.” He does not believe that God is dead; he thinks that the church should speak with authority instead of trying to be “with it”; and he predicts that if religion makes a comeback in America it will take place within a Judaeo-Christian framework. When it comes to social structures, Berger shares the Burkean-Tocquevillian view that the strength of a nation comes through traditional “mediating” institutions such as family and church. (It is in this context that he finds a good word

to say about the New Left: its members recognized the dangers of the all-encompassing state and experimented with their own mediating structures.) Politically and economically, Berger opposes socialism as well as such attempts at class-leveling as “affirmative action.”

These positions add up to conservatism, though a kind of conservatism which is closer to *The Public Interest* than to *The National Review*. Berger accepts many of the basic principles of the New Deal, and has no desire to turn the clock back to any bygone era (or at least no hope of doing so, though he does admit to a certain nostalgia for Maria Theresa’s Austro-Hungarian empire!). What makes this book remarkable stems not only from the fact that its author is both a Christian and a conservative but also from the fact that he is a sociologist. Since the time of Comte “the science of society” has often warred with Christianity and even tried to replace it. But Berger knows the “enemy” discipline so well—and loves it so much—that he can fight the secularists with their own weapons.

Relativization, for example, is a technique often used by social scientists to debunk religion. “You think you’re saving souls,” they say, “but what you’re really doing is bringing people peace of mind.” Which is all right, they sometimes concede, except that a trained psychiatrist can do the job at least as well without all the hocus-pocus. But supposing relativization is turned around and applied to the psychiatrists themselves. Berger is not concerned with what the psychiatrists think they are doing but what, given the structure of modern society, they *are* doing. He notes that “institutionalized psychologism” came along at a time when the bureaucratization of society had begun to cause people great anxiety as to how to define themselves. It filled a consumer “identity market.” Yet it was precisely these huge bureaucratic structures which also needed the skills of psychologists and “human-relations” experts as a means of insuring their control

over citizens and workers. Institutionalized psychotherapy came to perform a strategic rôle in American life; it straddled the line between public and private, commuting between home and office, while enjoying a quasi-official status in American life. Here Berger resembles Christopher Lasch, whose *Haven in a Heartless World* calls attention to the invasion of "the caring professions" into a realm once occupied by the family. Berger's analysis certainly dovetails with Lasch's (and with those of other critics of institutionalized psychiatry, such as Thomas Szasz and Martin Gross). His target, however, is bigger. What he finally has in mind is Irving Kristol's "new class," which includes not only the professional shrinks and social workers but the popularizers and communicators of secular culture: therapists, atheist theologians, radical academicians, all sorts of "innovators," and, of course, the media elites that bring them all into our living rooms. In Berger's analysis these evangelists play a "repressive" rôle in contemporary America—that is to say, they repress transcendence.

There are times when even the most worldly people may be struck with the notion that there could be something beyond this world—or above it, or inside it—which may be worth exploring. This is a dangerous thought. It threatens the monistic *Weltanschauung* of secular liberalism, a view of the world which Berger (borrowing from G. K. Chesterton) compares to that of "a slightly sleepy businessman right after lunch." But the experience of transcendence is a compelling one; left to themselves, people who have been brushed by it might start taking it seriously on its own terms. Thus there is a need for what Berger calls "reality policemen," whose function it is to account for those strange and frightening moments when, perhaps even without willing to do so, we find ourselves transcending—literally, "climbing over"—the world of secular liberalism. The "new class" plays this rôle. Its members serve to explain, which is to say explain away, those

moments as chimeras or "mystifications" of something that is happening in the "real" world. In another age these explainers would have been considered scandalous, but the circle has turned: now they serve to buttress the *status quo*. As seen from the command posts of American culture, it is the religious who are scandalous today; Berger invites anyone who wants to test this proposition "to make religious affirmations at an upper-middle-class cocktail party." Still, scandals have a way of spreading. The liberal-secular world of the 1970's is being pressured at a number of points. If it ever does crack, Berger will deserve a share of credit for the breakout.

Reviewed by GEORGE MCKENNA

From the Heights

Zarathustra's Sister: The Case of Elisabeth and Friedrich Nietzsche, by H.F. Peters, *New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1977. 243 pp. \$8.95.*

THIS IS THE SECOND biography H.F. Peters has written of a person important in Nietzsche's life. The first was of Lou Andreas-Salome, the remarkable woman who was for a short time loved by Nietzsche. Interest in Lou Salome, however, stems not just from her relationship with the German philosopher; her friendships spanned an amazing array of writers and scholars, including Rilke, Freud, and Buber, and she was a prolific essayist and novelist in her own right.

The same cannot be said for the subject of Peters' second biography, Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth. Elisabeth was remarkable only for the banality of her intellect and character—an impression which Peters' book, building on the