

The Limits of Mellowness

The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation, by Peter L. Berger, *Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979. xv + 220 pp. \$9.95.*

PROFESSOR PETER BERGER has a sure sense of the movement of contemporary thought about religion, and a touch of insight concerning the weaknesses of popular writing about it. His *Rumor of Angels* (1969), written in the aftermath of Harvey Cox's *Secular City*, called attention to the depth of perennial religious experience which Cox's book largely ignored, and raised the first effective voice against the premature resolution of the religious possibility on secularist lines. Now, ten years later, Berger brings once more to the analysis of the religious environment the sure insight which enables him to identify the primary issue: "modernity as a near-inconceivable expansion of the area of human life open to choices." If Berger's phrase has an old-fashioned ring, this is because it echoes the grand theme of the sixties, when Cox, Thomas J. J. Altizer, and John A. T. Robinson proclaimed the liberating influences of the technology which has since made modernity's triumph evident. Indeed, the beast inhabits and possesses the theological literature of the last century. It has been given many names. For Nietzsche and Gabriel Vahanian, modernity signaled the death of God in culture. Historians and sociologists have sometimes called it post-Constantinianism. Cox himself considered the "privatizing" of religion to be among its most important aspects. The character of modernity is, however, uncontested. The limitless possibilities of technique, abetted by the various metaphysics of subjectivity which echo and encourage its Promethean potentialities, have obscured those mediate forms of thought and social organization that seemingly defined the civilization only a short decade ago. And when the complex texture of humane tradition is uncertain,

possibilities appear equally valuable, or at least equally defensible. Christ and Zoroaster contend as peers; choosing is unavoidable, heresy imperative.

The heart of Berger's exposition is his analysis of the three great choices he discerns: tradition, the deductive possibility; criticism of the type rooted in the enlightenment, the reductive possibility; and the inductive possibility, belief based upon the dialectic of experience. Since the reductive possibility is systematically bound to secular consciousness, and the deductive possibility, identified by Berger with Barthian neo-orthodoxy, too alien to reason and history, the proffered key must be inductive. As a methodological model Berger offers the thought of Schleiermacher, who traced the affirmations of tradition and dogma to a psychological ground. Religious insight and the cognitive content of faith are then to be developed from "the metahuman intentionality of the religious phenomenon," in traditional language, from our longing for God.

That religious experience may be sought and criticized inductively is an unrevolutionary conclusion. The tradition is venerable, and Berger discusses the method and its weaknesses judiciously. What distinguishes his appeal to the inductive possibility is an unaccountable timidity concerning the relation between the reasonable analysis of experience and the deeper sources of faith and theology. Having argued persuasively that religious experience is possible, Berger quickly issues the standard warnings against "leaps of faith" and "positions based on some rock of immunity against rational and empirical criticism." These warnings in turn prepare the reader for the conclusion, almost traditional in arguments of this type, that Christian faith ought never to lead us "to succumb to the authority of Christian tradition, be it expressed in Scripture or in ecclesiastical institution." And having effectively evoked the image of the inauthentic intellectual dishonorably yielding up his freedom before some Geneva tribunal, Berger offers us his crisp alternative. What Christian faith does mean

is quite simply this: conviction that the core contents of the Christian message provide the fullest and most adequate interpretation of one's own experience of God, world, and self. Put differently, Christian faith here means to express the conviction that the universe ultimately makes sense in the light of Sinai and Calvary.

The method is familiar. Its essence is the attempt to leap from a cool, carefully delineated analysis of religious subjectivity to the realm of "religion," a region of personal and unutterable meanings to which reference can successfully be made only through obscure metaphors. Such devices, of which Berger's "dark drums of God" is an example, are often introduced climactically in contemporary theological writing, much as the concluding sunset in films of questionable artistic power, to conceal banality with suggestions of ineffable significance. This discursive pattern is now well-nigh standard in departments of religious studies, in which religion is often conceived as a history, explored through laborious scholarship, and a future, vaguely but powerfully invoked through metaphors redolent of Teilhard, Moltmann, and Bloch, with past and future unconnected by any present in which morally significant action might occur. The method is the shadow of the nominalistic scheme of knowing which passes from sensation to intuition immediately, studiously neglecting that great middle ground of ideas, essences, and potentialities which makes shared meaning and reasonable action possible. Existentially, the method circumvents the inherent tendency of historical reflection to evoke specific action selected from the range of actual possibility. And it might also be suggested that Berger bypasses this marketplace of common meanings and possible moralities because it is inhabited by angelic messengers whose existence he will posit but whom he is not anxious to meet.

As a means of commending religious affirmation to the citizens of modernity who pass their lives untouched by the ideology

of modern religious studies, the method has not thus far been successful. In ordinary experience the attempt to discover meaning without truth, construing an interpretation without invoking its authority and analyzing our experience without making bold ontological claims for the experienced, has tested subjectivity too heroically. But the attempt to rack from human consciousness a bold confession of truths experienced but fleetingly and by anticipation is still not so heroic as the effort to interpret Calvary without the aid the Ethiopian eunuch found indispensable. The attempt to comprehend Sinai apart from the illuminating context of obediences, powers, and acts which it is Berger's method nowhere to discuss has traditionally ended in the sentimentality of Matthew Arnold or the contempt of Nietzsche. The eclecticism of the book is also unaccountable. There is no compelling reason why an exposition based on Schleiermacher and the darker sayings of Meister Eckhardt, interesting and important as they may be, should be taken as a serious investigation of contemporary religious possibilities, less reason still why the mysticism of the East should claim us until we have learned the mysticism of Bernard and of William Law. Berger's scholarship is always impressive, but it is highly personal, and his claim that liberal Protestantism is an especially good guide to the encounter with modernity is not entirely convincing.

Finally, it is perhaps relevant to suggest that the style of the book illustrates the heretical imperative which is its subject. If it is the business of theology (on the hypothesis that the gods speak) to explicate the ultimate truths of human destiny, and of history to enter sympathetically the minds of many men, justifying none unfairly and judging all discretely, it is surely the nature of sociology that by its method it presents an utterly relativized world. This is not particularly damaging when the subject matter is trivial, nor is it obviously intrusive when the product is statistical, but when those great loyalties which form the spine of human experience are brought

under the sociological style, the text itself becomes an equal blasphemy against each possibility it represents. Jesus and Allah appear along an undifferentiated horizon, to be treated with polite dispassion. Peter Berger, whose work is sociology, quite naturally considers such treatment conducive to an understanding which is "mellow," and reasonable. But in the long run, if there are any gods, it may not behoove us to be too detached and mellow regarding them. Perhaps it is best to see *The Heretical Imperative* as the summary report of a group of Anglo-American theologians and sociologists who are intrigued by religious thought but repelled by religion. Nietzsche observed that in modernity God is unacceptable not to reason but to taste. The faint odor of that apothegm hangs over *The Heretical Imperative*.

Reviewed by JAMES PATRICK