

Review Essay

RELIGION AND EMPIRICISM IN THE WORKS OF PETER BERGER

by Robert C. Fuller

Abstract. Peter Berger established himself in the sociological profession in large part through his functional interpretations of religion and its ostensible demise in relation to the empirical bent of modern intellectual thought. Yet, in his effort to expand the scope of empiricism such that it might address nontrivial concerns, Berger found himself attempting to understand the “substance” of religion—that is, the conviction that there exists an “other” which confronts us unconditionally and consequently forms the basis of all issues concerning value and meaning. Berger’s writings deserve critical attention in that they disclose both the problems and the promises of utilizing empirical methods for the task of rehabilitating, rather than debunking, humanity’s religious propensities.

Keywords: Berger, Peter; projection, reductionistic versus non-reductionistic views of; radical empiricism versus pietistic empiricism; signals of transcendence; sociology of religion; substantive versus functional definitions of religion.

As Arthur Vidich and Stanford Lyman document in their recent book *American Sociology* (1985), the academic discipline of sociology emerged part and parcel with the secularization of America’s Protestant religious heritage. The subtitle of Vidich and Lyman’s book, “worldly rejections of religion,” succinctly summarizes the biographical process whereby individuals abandoned theological categories of thought and committed themselves to the empirical method of the fledgling social sciences. Vidich and Lyman contend that many of the most influential American sociologists have thought of their discipline as the attempt to

Robert C. Fuller is associate professor of philosophy and religious studies, Bradley University, Peoria, Illinois 61625. An earlier version of this paper was delivered during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, Georgia, 22 November 1986.

[*Zygon*, vol. 22, no. 4 (December 1987).]

© 1987 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

transform Protestantism's concern for the systematic salvation of the world into a scientific terminology more suited to the modern intellectual climate. Not only can this thesis be demonstrated readily in terms of the life and works of such pioneer sociologists as Albion Small and George Herbert Mead, but it also has been shown to apply to the development of other social sciences, particularly psychology (Bakan 1966; Ross 1972; Furner 1975; Lubove 1965).

The fact that so many of the founding fathers of American social sciences were seeking to relocate the inner-worldly asceticism of their inherited religious faith into a new conceptual terminology implicated them in something similar to a cultural paradigm shift. Before their new scientific outlook could claim victory over its theological predecessors it first had to prove to be capable of subsuming religion within its own interpretive categories. It is thus not surprising that most pioneering sociologists went to considerable efforts to study religion from an empirical, social scientific point of view. Almost without exception they interpreted religion in the functionalist categories which were thought to be appropriate to an empirical discipline. By showing that the cultural functions performed by religion (e.g., providing theodicies, legitimating social structures, holding forth systems of meaning, clothing social mores in an aura of sacrality, etc.) are fully explicable in social scientific terms, the vast majority of American sociologists have either implicitly or explicitly suggested that religion represents an earlier stage in the evolution of Western culture. The further implication, of course, is that the empirical method utilized by the social sciences can potentially yield new visions of "the good person" and "the good society" that are far more relevant to individuals living in the twentieth century than are the antiquated doctrines of our religious traditions.

Strikingly absent in Vidich and Lyman's account of the American sociological tradition is even a single reference to Peter Berger. Berger, the author of the widely used introduction to sociological thought entitled *Invitation to Sociology* and a preeminent authority in the sociology of knowledge, represents an interesting test case for interpreting social scientific thought and its apparent worldly rejection of religion. Berger established himself in the sociological profession to a large degree through his functional interpretations of religion and its ostensible demise in relation to the empirical bent of modern intellectual thought. Yet Berger has felt keenly the limitations of social scientific method in providing modern culture with solutions to the most profound issues which confront humanity. In his effort to expand the scope of empiricism so that it might better address nontrivial concerns, Berger found himself attempting to understand the "substance" rather than the functions traditionally associated with religion—that is, there

exists an “other” which confronts us unconditionally and consequently forms the basis of all issues concerning value and meaning. The understanding of the empirical method which has emerged in Berger’s efforts to interpret the substance of religious conviction evidences what might be called a *religious rejection of worldliness*. While Berger has continued to understand the social sciences as the attempt to study empirically the human enterprise, he has nonetheless radically expanded the scope and meaning of empiricism such that it might serve to rehabilitate rather than debunk humanity’s religious propensities.

BERGER AND THE EMPIRICAL TRADITION

Although *Invitation to Sociology* was not Peter Berger’s first major work, it certainly signalled his emergence as one of the preeminent spokespersons for the sociological perspective. In this best-selling introduction to the discipline, Berger advertises sociology as “a peculiarly modern and Western cogitation. . . . it is constituted by a peculiarly modern form of consciousness” (Berger 1963, 25). By this Berger meant that sociology reflects the critical awareness of a post-theological world. The collapse of a monolithic theological tradition has made it increasingly possible for individuals to “look behind” and to “see through” religious belief systems and to glimpse the social structures which generated their various doctrinal claims. Thus, because of its primary concern to expose religion as the projection of humanity’s attempt to understand the world of everyday life, “there is a debunking motif inherent in sociological consciousness” (Berger 1963, 38). Lest his readership not perceive the full implications of sociological consciousness, Berger repeatedly illustrated its debunking prowess with barbed references to religion.

Berger sustained his “debunking” approach to religion in both his well-known *The Social Construction of Reality*, which he coauthored with Thomas Luckmann, and his *The Sacred Canopy*. Religion, he asserted, can be fully and exhaustively explained within the empirical framework of the sociology of knowledge. Rooted in Karl Marx’s proposition that human consciousness is wholly determined by the forms and structures of social existence, the sociology of knowledge interprets all systems of thought as projections of humanity’s efforts to symbolize and legitimate the brute realities of everyday life. Our ideas as well as our identities are functions of specific socioeconomic realities and can be analyzed empirically in terms of their function in legitimating these realities. Berger explained, for example, that the religious beliefs of the American South can be seen as projections of a racist society seeking to explain and justify the inequalities of everyday life in terms of a “higher” will.

During this phase of his career Berger maintained that the paramount reality of everyday life does not contain "marginal events" (Berger & Luckmann 1966, 96). By interpreting the content and functions of religious beliefs solely in terms of social and economic structures, Berger could view sociology and its debunking spirit as making possible a liberation from unjust and inhumane belief systems. Berger observed that "one who knows the rules of the game is in a position to cheat" (Berger 1963, 152). Sociological consciousness exposes the controlling functions exerted by various systems of belief and thus paves the way for both disbelief and rebellious freedom.

Berger warned, however, that sociological consciousness carries a price. It forever removes one from the "comfortable caves" of social conformity and instead demands that we step outside the caves to face the night alone. The beliefs and values which formerly seemed to represent universal truth have been relativized to their social and economic functions within a particular cultural group in a particular historical epoch. It follows that "the sociological perspective is not conducive to an onward-and-upward outlook, but will rather lead to one degree or another of disenchantment with regard to the interpretations of social reality given in Sunday schools and civic classes" (Berger 1963, 151).

Sociological method, then, represents the culmination of the secularizing process whereby religious traditions have been relativized to the condition of nonuniversality and nonultimacy. Building upon Max Weber's notion of the rationalizing process through which supernatural belief systems gradually give way to naturalistic (i.e., scientific) categories of thought, Berger believed that the growth of empiricism was making religious belief increasingly anachronistic. Although he never totally embraced his colleague Luckmann's thesis that the forms of modern industrial life will not permit the continuation of traditional patterns of religious thought, he did acknowledge that the modern intellectual climate had become sufficiently pluralized as to make it impossible for educated individuals to maintain orthodox theological positions without being guilty of "bad faith" (Berger [1967] 1969, 183). Berger simply took it for granted that "the supernatural as a meaningful reality is absent or remote from the horizons of everyday life of large numbers, very probably of the majority, of people in modern society" (Berger [1969] 1970, 5). The triumph of the empirical method of understanding the human enterprise has simultaneously led to the demise of the meaningfulness of belief in that which exists beyond the paramount reality of socioeconomic life.

THE HOMELESS MIND

The collapse of a hegemonic theological tradition and the accompanying pluralization of world views have created their own discontent. Pluralization has made us more intellectually mobile—so mobile, in fact, that we have become intellectually homeless. We have become habituated to a style of thinking that perceives the relativity of any and all truth claims. Now that we know how to “cheat” the rules of the game of life, we are faced with the frightening alternative of both social and metaphysical anomie.

As Berger has been quick to point out, the “homelessness” of modern social life has found its most devastating expression in the area of religion (Berger 1973, 184). Because of the demise of religion in modern society, our social and intellectual homelessness “has become metaphysical—that is, it has become ‘homelessness’ in the cosmos” (Berger 1973, 185). The significance of this collapse of belief in a higher, metaphysical reality becomes most apparent when one looks at the theodical functions of religion (i.e., its capacity to explain and bestow meaning upon the experiences of suffering and evil). Berger has observed that “modernity has accomplished many far-reaching transformations, but it has not fundamentally changed the finitude, fragility and mortality of the human condition. . . . Modern society has threatened the plausibility of religious theodicies, but it has not removed the experiences that call for them. Human beings continue to be stricken by sickness and death; they continue to experience social injustice and deprivation. . . . What [modernity] has accomplished is to seriously weaken those definitions of reality that previously made that human condition easier to bear” (Berger 1973, 185).

Berger’s point is that the social sciences have in large part failed to keep their bold, even utopian promises. True, “sociological consciousness” has helped relativize both political and religious absolutisms and thereby made possible greater degrees of autonomy and freedom. Yet, as Berger stated in his *Invitation to Sociology*, this kind of conceptual liberation is aptly characterized as a demand to step “outside the caves alone, to face the night” (Berger 1963, 150). The problem, however, is that the particular kind of empiricism insisted upon by our modern social sciences fates us to remaining in the dark of night. By restricting the scope of reality to the material forces shaping everyday life, the empirical method has shed no light on the great issues that face humanity both as individuals and as a species. It was in this context that Berger began to realize that the functions of religion (i.e., the positing of a sacred cosmos for the purposes of world-building and legitimation) cannot be so easily distinguished from its substance. The essence of

religion is precisely the claim that we are not alone in the night. Religion is based upon human consciousness of an "other" which confronts us in some unconditional, ultimate way and in so doing makes it possible for the first time to "see through" or "look behind" the shadows of the night. The significance of the "substance" of religion is that it enables us to distinguish between the trivial and the paramount meanings of everyday life. It rescues us from the condition of homelessness. The time had come, Berger believed, to relativize the relativizers; that is, the fact that certain groups of people are uncomfortable about religious propositions does not in any way bear upon their truth or falsity. The point is that the popularity of religious beliefs among modern intellectuals is no more relevant to the issue of its validity than the absence of any notion of quantum theory from the world view of Zulu society is to the validity of quantum theory. Even more to the point, Berger observed that "Whatever religious apparitions the future may bring forth, it would be regrettable if the scientific study of religion were systematically blinded to them by its own conceptual machinery" (Berger 1974a, 133).

The issue, finally, is not whether social scientific thought understands the world-building *functions* of religious thought. Berger suggests, in fact, that there is an ideological purpose behind the social sciences' tendency to emphasize the functional attributes of religion. By equating religious phenomena with nonreligious phenomena, the supposed empiricism of modern social science has instead avoided the issue of the *substance* of religion—for example, the recurring experience that "the reality of everyday life is ever again breached as other realities force themselves upon consciousness" (Berger 1974a, 130). The social sciences foster a myopic vision all their own. If they are not to blind us permanently from even the chance of seeing through the dark of night, then their lenses must be readjusted to make possible an understanding (in the sense of Weber's *verstehen*) of the substantive claim that we are not alone in the universe.

ENLARGING THE SCOPE OF EMPIRICISM

Berger's earlier notion of the empirical method led him to assert that "sociological theory must, by its own logic, view religion as a human projection, and by the same logic can have nothing to say about the possibility that this projection may refer to something other than the being of its projector" (Berger [1967] 1969, 180). However, in a somewhat startling appendix to *The Sacred Canopy* entitled "Sociological and Theological Perspectives," Berger began to equivocate on the appropriateness of empiricism as a tool for exploring the biggest questions of human existence. Even granted that all human affirmations are rooted

in sociohistorical processes, it does not necessarily follow that they are wholly circumscribed by these processes. As Berger states it, "a human projection does not logically preclude the possibility that the projected meanings may have an ultimate status independent of man. Indeed, if a religious view of the world is posited, the anthropological ground of these projections may itself be the reflection of a reality that includes both world and man, so that man's ejaculations of meaning into the universe ultimately point to an all-embracing meaning in which he himself is grounded" (Berger [1967] 1969, 180).

In his next two books on religion, *A Rumor of Angels* and *The Heretical Imperative*, Berger systematically addressed himself to a postmodern form of theology which takes just such a "religious view of the world" as its starting point. It has been Berger's contention that theology must proceed by looking for traces of the sacred within common human experience. Theology, he suggests, should "seek out what might be called signals of transcendence within the empirically given human situation" (Berger [1969] 1970, 52). Acknowledging his affinity with a liberal Protestant tradition dating back to Friedrich Schleiermacher, Berger suggests that theology can protect itself from the debunking spirit of modern intellectual thought by educing its own *sui generis* data from those prototypical human experiences that, while found within the domain of our "natural" reality, appear to point beyond that reality (Berger [1969] 1970, 53).

The merits of Berger's argument that theology must proceed from an empirical or anthropological starting point does not concern us here. Instead, what is of interest in Berger's later writings is his implicit advocacy of the corollary proposition that any truly empirical account of the human condition must be amenable to "a religious view of the world." It would appear that Berger is not simply suggesting that it is a matter of arbitrary choice as to whether one approaches empirical accounts of his "signals of transcendence" (i.e., the propensity for order, hope, humor, etc.) from a religious or nonreligious point of view. Indeed, the very merits of his effort to establish theology on an empirical basis depend upon whether an empirical account of these "signals" is in fact capable of discerning anything that would prove recalcitrant to positivistic interpretation. His contention that signals of transcendence have theological import if viewed from the perspective "that man projects ultimate meanings into reality because that reality is, indeed, ultimately meaningful, and because his own being (the empirical ground of these projections) contains and intends these same ultimate meanings" disguises and confuses the real issue (Berger [1967] 1969, 180). If empiricism can only establish that humans "intend" ultimate meanings, then it can do nothing to rescue religion from its

cultured despisers. However, if empiricism could establish that human nature in some way "contains" traces of ultimacy, then it would furnish religion its own *sui generis* data over which it alone can claim proper jurisdiction. This is what Berger seems to be arguing.

Following Schleiermacher, Berger came to defend the view that the essence of religion is neither doctrinal belief nor moral codes but rather a "particular kind of experience" (Berger [1979] 1980, 121). This experience, moreover, occurs in the form of "immediate self-consciousness" and for this reason is in large part prior to, and independent of, social conditioning. More importantly, this particular kind of self-consciousness is not simply the experience of one's own nature (in the manner of Feuerbach's notion of projection). Instead, "religious consciousness is consciousness of something beyond itself" (in the manner of Rudolph Otto's notion of the wholly otherness of the object of religious experience).

As Berger shifted his attention to the religious dimension of naturally occurring human experiences, he began to perceive everyday life as including occasional moments of participation in marginal realities. Berger asserts that religious experience points toward the existence of an extramundane order of things which "actively impinges from all sides on the empirical sphere of human existence" (Berger [1969] 1970, 94). Every once in a while human consciousness encounters that which lies beyond the boundaries of everyday life and in so doing apprehends the world of the uncanny, the "totally other" (Berger 1974a, 209). "The reality of everyday life is ever again breached, as other realities *force themselves* upon consciousness" (Berger 1974a, 130).

Any pretense of offering an empirical account of human existence which excludes this particular form of experience is, according to Berger, simply not being faithful to the spirit of empiricism. What parades as an empirically based approach to the study of human nature in our current intellectual environment is instead the ideology of those who have conceptual difficulty with the concept of transcendence and seek to legislate *a priori* criteria of what should and should not be accepted as facts of experience. Yet, as Berger points out, "the denial of metaphysics may here be identified with the triumph of triviality" (Berger [1969] 1970, 75). Questions concerning the purpose of life, the meaning of death, or the relationship of humanity to the First Cause of the universe have not disappeared with the advent of modern social science and its rather narrow brand of empiricism. Issues such as these continue to warrant examination and require a method appropriate to the task. A fully empirical account of human experience must necessarily recognize humanity's "consciousness of something beyond itself." As Berger states it, "A philosophical anthropology worthy of the name

will have to regain a perception of these experiences [i.e., experiences of a wholly other impinging upon human consciousness], and with this regain a metaphysical dimension" (Berger [1969] 1970, 75).

It is not at all coincidental that in his later writings Berger repeatedly draws upon William James. Berger's efforts to expand the scope of empiricism to include a phenomenological appreciation of immediate self-consciousness evidence certain affinities with James's school of "radical empiricism." James's essays on radical empiricism culminated his career-long interest in constructing a philosophical anthropology on the basis of both the natural sciences and a properly phenomenological account of human consciousness. Although James's writings on this subject are complex and contain numerous technical subtleties, they can be conveniently summarized as arguing three related propositions. First, James contended that the "conjunctive relations" phenomenologically present in experience have a veridical rather than simply "mentalistic" existence. This, of course, pertains directly to Berger's argument that the religious consciousness of standing in relationship to a divine reality is consciousness *of* something wholly other than itself and not simply a projection of its own contents as most social scientists presume. Whereas most modern adherents of empiricism dismiss something so subjective as immediate self-consciousness as outside the "real" world of fact, James's radical empiricism insists that it is only when we "deal with private and personal phenomena as such [that] we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term" (James [1902] 1961, 386). Recognizing that the experiences of relationship to an extrasensory "More" are as empirically real as any other human experience, James was in a position to show that the world of the strict empiricist breaks down quickly. He argued that our immediate experiences of standing in relation to a "More" "suggest that our natural experience, our strictly moralistic and prudential experience, may be only a fragment of real human experience. They soften nature's outlines and open out the strangest possibilities and perspectives. This is why it seems to me that the logical understanding, working in abstraction from such specifically religious experiences, will always omit something, and fail to reach completely adequate solutions" (James [1909] 1971, 267).

Second, James's radical empiricism reveals that a "hermeneutics of suspicion" has no more empirical grounding—in fact less—than a "hermeneutics of restoration." That is, the modern tendency to relativize and debunk religion owing to its complicity in larger socioeconomic structures of life is being no more empirical—in fact less—than the effort to show its origin in a particular form of immediate self-consciousness. And third, James contended that the repeatability or

verifiability of an empirical phenomenon is not an exclusive criterion of its truth (or reality). As will be developed more fully in the following section, James offered a cogent argument for the heuristic or processive character of truth that Berger was to pick up in his own effort to expand the scope of empiricism so that it might be of assistance not only to the *Naturwissenschaften* but the *Geisteswissenschaften* as well.

PROBLEMS AND PROMISES

Berger's gradual adoption of a radical empiricism would appear to constitute a counterexample to any thesis concerning sociology's implication in the "worldly rejection of religion." In this sense Berger joins a good many American psychologists such as Gordon Allport, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and William James whose empirical investigations of immediate self-consciousness led them to reject scientific positivism in favor of a world view which recognizes metaphysical dimensions of human existence. Although this trend is less observable in social sciences such as sociology and anthropology, which are less interested in immediate self-consciousness per se, the writings of a Victor Turner or, to a lesser extent, Robert Bellah would seem to indicate that they too are capable of incorporating not only the functional but also the substantive attributes of religion.

Although Berger is clearly calling for a "religious rejection of worldly empiricism," he has not as yet clarified precisely what is entailed in his own methods for acknowledging "signals of transcendence." It would seem that every epistemology or method of obtaining knowledge presupposes an ontology, which is to say that all criteria for determining truth express an underlying conception of what is real. Thus, in rejecting the kind of empiricism that Berger says results in the "triumph of triviality" and the denial of metaphysics, he is simultaneously attempting to relocate empiricism on a new and nonpositivistic conception of ontology. In his review of *A Rumor of Angels*, James Gustafson pointed out Berger's failure to specify what kind of ontological conception warrants moving beyond a positivistic frame of reference (Gustafson 1970, 255). As Gustafson suggests, insofar as Berger is arguing that human experience provides a basis for knowledge about God, then he must also be prepared to offer a metaphysical account of why this is so in a manner similar to that of the process philosophers and theologians. Hence, when Berger states that man projects ultimate meanings into reality because his nature "contains" an ultimate reality or that "projection and reflection are movements within the same encompassive reality," he is invoking ontological conceptions that warrant further clarification. Indeed, before Berger's empiricism can support a philosophical anthropology which is capable of delineating the metaphysical dimen-

sions of human experience, he must pay more attention to the “conjunctive relations” this empiricism discloses. He needs, in other words, to pay more precise attention to what the nature of both “immediate consciousness” and a “divine nature” is so that they would support assertions that the structures of the former are in some way susceptible to influences from the latter.

What further complicates Berger’s efforts to use his expanded notion of empiricism to produce a nonreductionistic model of human experience is his mid-career shift from concern with issues surrounding the origin and function of religion to those dealing with its substance and truth. Earlier Berger had argued that sociology can account for both the origin (i.e., society’s need for, and incessant construction of, meaning structures) and function (i.e., providing plausibility structures which orient persons to the world) of religion. Yet once Berger abandoned his belief in the sociological origins of religion in favor of his view that religion develops from the incursion of an “other” into our immediate consciousness, he also ceased giving empirical attention to the anthropological function of religion or religious consciousness. His zealous desire to defend the substance of religion against its cultured despisers prompted him to enter the fray by presenting an “inductive faith”—that is, a move from a recognition of the empirical existence of “signals of transcendence” to considerations of their meaning and truth. Rather than using the empirical perspective to shed light on the functional value of religion, he undertakes far more ambitious tasks such as creating ecumenical dialogue between competing religious traditions and defining standards of religious truth. It is especially with the last of these that Berger most consistently belies the empiricist spirit of his efforts. He has, for example, on several occasions forced his own Christian biases upon what empirical data are, or are not, reliable (see Berger [1969] 1970, 88-89; 1974b, 206).

Part of the difficulty is Berger’s allegiance to what might be called a pietistic rather than fully radical empiricism (see Dean 1986, 5; Meland 1969, 9). Although both forms of empiricism treat experience as authoritative, the former posits a static God much in the Platonic sense of a transcendent reality casting its shadow upon human experience while the latter posits a pluralistic ontology in which our “conjunctive relations” with a “More” are interpreted solely in terms of their identifiable consequences within the mundane order of things. Pietistic empiricism thus has a great deal of similarity to the kind of natural theology prevalent in the early nineteenth century in that it is primarily seeking evidential proof of a divine presence whose attributes are already acknowledged and understood. In contrast, a radical empiricism recognizes an “other” only insofar as analyses of the causal factors respon-

sible for human experience so dictate, regardless of whether they conform to traditional theological assertions of universality, omnipotence, and so on. Berger, particularly in *A Rumor of Angels*, repeatedly looks to a transcendent, eternal, universal reality—one supposedly found in mathematics—to the point of equivocating the importance of empirically ascertaining the “functions” of this divine reality within our historical flux. Stated in other terms, Berger has abandoned the Barthian theological methods of his earlier days (Berger 1961), but he has not abandoned his Barthian God.

This tendency to link his empiricism with a static, idealistic ontology also shed light on Berger’s tenacious pursuit of theological “truth” despite his admission that certainty is not possible within an inductive system of thought. His explicit reliance upon James in this connection is appropriate for this reason, even if inept. James acknowledged that the only “test” of inductively reasoned propositions is their suitability as guides to experience. But what James realized, and Berger apparently has not, is that the pragmatic test of ideas collapses issues of truth into issues of value. For James, this was still an empirical enterprise in that he employed an evolutionary-adaptive framework for ascertaining the value of any given form of thought or action. Berger, although eagerly appropriating James’s notion of the processive rather than static nature of religious truth, fails to articulate a method for establishing the relationship between religious beliefs or experiences and broader contexts of human fulfillment. That is, the major promise of a fully empirical approach to religion is that it can potentially render “religious consciousness” a poignant example of, rather than a miraculous exception to, humanity’s ability to perceive and adapt to ever wider environments. Surely Berger, a social scientist, is capable of generating a model of human nature which is sufficiently comprehensive to schematize and perhaps even rank in order the various factors which nourish human existence. This model would then allow him to offer empirically derived arguments concerning the functional value (as opposed to the truth value) of “religious consciousness” by situating it among evolutionary-adaptive discussions of such issues as “environment,” “adaptation,” and “causality.” Berger hints at precisely such a mode of mediating genuinely empirical accounts of human nature into a religiously significant world view in *A Rumor of Angels*, in which he discusses the appearance and function of “signals of transcendence” within the world of everyday life. However, in general his concern with establishing the theological truth rather than the anthropological value of religion obscures the clearest contributions which might come from his radically empirical approach to the substance of immediate self-consciousness.

Whatever the problems concerning his efforts to approach Christian theology in an inductive way, Berger has certainly emerged as one of the most interesting religious thinkers of our day. Religious thought, as distinct from theology, is unencumbered by demands for universality, precision, or even consistency. It is, instead, content to recognize and reflect upon "an unseen order of things" regardless of how capriciously that order discloses itself to human understanding. Herein lies the genius of his efforts to fit not only the functions but the substance of religion within his empirical outlook.¹ His writings have enabled many to revive a form of religious thinking that goes to the very heart of America's creative spirituality. In this sense he joins a long and illustrious lineage of religious thinkers in this country for whom an empirical approach to self-consciousness furnishes both the intellectual and experiential basis for an aesthetic spirituality. For Berger, no less than for a Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, or James, a properly empirical account of human experience makes possible what William Clebsch describes as the aesthetic "consciousness of the beauty of living in harmony with divine thing—in a word, being at home in the universe" (Clebsch 1972, xvi).

Peter Berger's insistence on an "expanded" empiricism as the foundation for a modern philosophical anthropology enables us to remove ourselves from the condition of metaphysical homelessness. Although his empiricism has not as yet given rise to a coherent theological method, it has enabled many to join him in his religious rejection of worldliness. His writings also have encouraged others (perhaps even more than himself) to awaken to a new perspective within which a certain mellowness in one's religious thinking takes on a new attractiveness. For, as Berger observes, "those who have truly encountered the 'reality of the unseen' can *afford* the mellowness of liberality, both in their lives and in their thinking" (Berger [1979] 1980, 142).

NOTE

1. It is interesting in this context to refer to James's commentary on precisely this topic: "Let empiricism once become associated with religion, as hitherto, through some strange misunderstanding, it has been associated with irreligion, and I believe that a new era of religion as well as of philosophy will be ready to begin. . . . As the authority of past tradition tends more and more to crumble, men naturally turn a wistful ear to the authority of reason or to the evidence of present fact. They will assuredly not be disappointed if they open their minds to what the thicker and more radical empiricism has to say" (James [1909] 1971, 270).

REFERENCES

- Bakan, D. 1966. "Behaviorism and American Urbanization." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 2:5-28.
- Berger, P. 1961. *The Precarious Vision*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

- _____. 1963. *Invitation to Sociology*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books.
- _____. [1967] 1969. *The Sacred Canopy*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books.
- _____. [1969] 1970. *A Rumor of Angels*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books.
- _____. 1973. *The Homeless Mind*. New York: Random House.
- _____. 1974a. "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive Versus Functional Definitions of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13:125-34.
- _____. 1974b. "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven: 2500 Years of Religious Ecstasy." *The Christian Century* (Dec. 24).
- _____. 1977. *Facing Up to Modernity*. New York: Basic Books.
- _____. [1979] 1980. *The Heretical Imperative*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books.
- Berger, P. and T. Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books.
- Clebsch, W. 1972. *American Religious Thought*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Dean, W. 1986. *American Religious Empiricism*. Albany: State Univ. of New York Press.
- Furner, M. 1975. *Advocacy and Objectivity: A Crisis in the Professionalization of American Social Science, 1865-1905*. Lexington, Ky.: Univ. of Kentucky Press.
- Gustafson, J. 1970. Review of Peter Berger's *A Rumor of Angels*. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 9:255-56.
- James, W. [1902] 1961. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Colliers.
- _____. [1909] 1971. *A Pluralistic Universe*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Lubove, R. 1965. *The Professional Altruist: The Emergence of Social Work as a Career, 1880-1930*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Meland, B. ed. 1969. *The Future of Empirical Theology*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Ross, D. 1972. *G. S. Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Vidich, A. and S. Lyman. 1985. *American Sociology*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press.