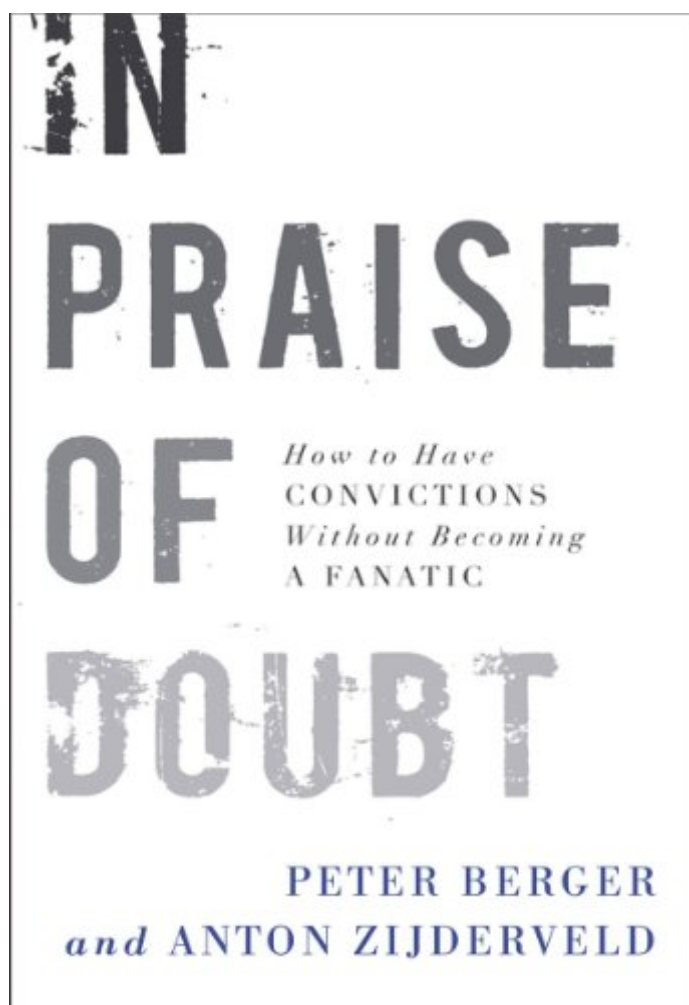


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In Praise Of Doubt: How To Have Convictions Without Becoming A Fanatic



Synopsis

“A book of great practical wisdom by authors who have profound insight into the intellectual dynamics governing contemporary life.” •Dallas Willard, author of *Knowing Christ Today* In *In Praise of Doubt*, two world-renowned social scientists, Peter L. Berger (*The Homeless Mind, Questions of Faith*) and Anton C. Zijderveld (*The Abstract Society, On Clichés*), map out how we can survive the political, moral, and religious challenges raised by the extreme poles of relativism and fundamentalism. A book that asks and answers Big Questions, *In Praise of Doubt* offers invaluable guidance on how to have convictions without becoming a fanatic.

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Customer Reviews

The book is not for the casual reader, or lay people. The language is hard to read and understand. There are many un-necessary parenthetical statements. It seems it was written by a monk stashed away in deep corner of a monastery who has the time to find the hardest words and expressions. It

does have some gem statements placed in an ocean of convoluted sentences. The subject is excellent and makes lots of sense, even though a few pronouncements are wrong. I read the whole book and was frustrated. I hope someone would translate it in ordinary English.

Berger wrote about the sociological process from where a belief system is taken-for-granted, on to when other ideas are introduced due to pluralism and globalization. This results in cognitive contamination and cognitive dissonance--suddenly things are no longer so clear and one loses security and their sense of certainty. There are three responses to pluralism, the first two are completely exclusivist and absolutist, they are fundamentalism and relativism. Fundamentalism is the attempt to revert BACK to that former "taken-for-grantedness" and the way to do this is to make everyone who disagrees with them an "other"--showing how they're all either stupid or diabolically evil. Next the fundamentalist needs to surround themselves with other fundamentalist and only read their books. They must create a protective bubble for themselves less they be contaminated. Next is relativism, it is a reaction to pluralism/globalization, it just simply concludes from the multiplicity of truth claims; that there absolutely is no absolute truth, and from the differing ethical ideals; that objective morality simply doesn't exist. Therefore, one must find his own subjective truth and moral ideals. The third position is the Inclusivist position. The Inclusivist believes there is such thing as absolute truth, objective morality and meaning, but one is humble enough to acknowledge that others may have glimpses of reality as well and to seek to learn from them. Inclusivism is the middle ground between the extremes of relativism and fundamentalism; it's to think, to take seriously rational objections, to be willing to round off some rough edges in one's belief system, to be open to changing one's mind and yet, also to not be like the wave of the sea, tossed to and fro by every argument and opinion. It is not an easy position to maintain by any means. One needs to make commitments despite uncertainty and one may need to live with doubts, resisting the knee-jerk reactionist positions.

I am a long time fan of Peter Berger's work. I turn to his writings for a number of reasons. First, he is an academic and empirical sociologist. This means that I can count on him to have his ear to the ground and his feet on the ground. That is, he bases his conclusions not on abstract hypotheses but on real trends and realities. Second, he has many decades of experience and occasionally draws on his lived experience to inform his analysis and conclusions. I tend to trust reflective older people who have seen much of the world (at least more than I have). Third, he writes with a minimum of jargon. I have nothing against jargon in principle, but Berger's sparing use of it means it is more like

hearing a wise neighbor telling you what he thinks is important. Fourth, he is a religious believer (albeit a skeptical one), a rarity in academia. This means that his views capture a wider range of human reality than the usual academically informed views. Fifth, he espouses neither leftist (e.g. anti-globalization and anti-capitalist) nor standard liberal platitudes (e.g. individual freedom is the most important value for moderns.) In light of this, "In Praise of Doubt" was both welcome and a little disappointing. First I would recommend it for the genuine insights it brings to the topic. One of the insights which is not explicitly stated, but which I learnt from this book, is that there are two contradictory impulses in the nature of man: (1) on the one hand the need to communicate, which leads to "cognitive contamination", that is being affected by unusual and new ideas and thus being faced with new choices and options (although I would quibble with the use of "cognitive"); and on the other hand, (2) the need to escape the burden and responsibility of choice (or freedom in Erich Fromm's phrase), which leads men to group themselves in insulated, exclusive and closed communities. However, closed communities are threatened by the cognitive contamination that inevitably comes from hybrid pluralistic situations and encounters, where different ways of life inevitably bump up against each other. This is a source of conflict in modern societies. I was a little disappointed for a number of reasons. First the book seeks to address the danger of nihilism or relativism for an individual caught in this predicament. This is characterized as the situation where any commitment an individual may make is always potentially reversible. (I'm "into" Buddhism today, implies I can jump "out" of it tomorrow.) This has been the enduring concern of existentialist thinking (especially religious versions of it) but apart from some apposite references to Kierkegaard, Tillich and others, this important discussion left me without a clear sense of where the authors would have us go with this. Perhaps the intention was for us readers to pick up the strand for ourselves. A good idea. Second, the writing style varied between Berger's own lucid writing and what I assume was the result of a not so successful collaboration. I was also disappointed in that this book did not cover or summarize some of the key conclusions to Berger's other important works which non-academics would not usually read. This is a trade book whereas Berger's other books are written for academic audiences. Perhaps he judged that it was not possible to fit more in.

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