



Pluralism, Relativism and Tolerance

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The three words - "pluralism", "relativism" and "tolerance", are the source of spectacular confusion today - the confusion extending from personal faith and witness to good citizenship to public policy. This confusion has also led to an entirely unnecessary Christian intimidation in public discussion, as if those who dismiss historic Christianity somehow were speaking from moral high ground.

Let me start with some functional definitions which, if they were agreed on (which they are not), would minimize misunderstanding. Pluralism is a social fact. Relativism is a philosophical doctrine which offers one interpretation of that fact. Tolerance is a personal attitude and/or social policy regarding how we respond to that same fact.

PLURALISM

Religious and philosophical pluralism in America is simply a fact about society. That is to say, there is a plurality of beliefs and institutions that support them in this country. If you doubt its existence, you might as well doubt the existence of New Jersey ... you may or may not like it, but it is still there. There are thousands of denominations within the traditional Christian and Jewish religious groups, then there is a full range of other world religions, also the "secular" religions and world views, and every conceivable combination of all of these.

In a decisive break with the European model, the American experiment began with an explicit provision for religious and philosophical pluralism in the First Amendment to the Constitution. It prevented anyone group from using the power of the state to establish its own creed, form a national church or enforce a compulsory ideology. But it also gave citizens the freedom to express religiously or non-religiously based moral values in public policy - if they could persuade others to agree. Since that time, the scope of pluralism has increased dramatically, yet with the exception of the Civil War, the nation has been able to maintain a working unity in the midst of diversity.

One of America's strengths has been its honest recognition of and provision for pluralism. The state has been saved from the incursion of a national church trying to dictate public policy over public will and secure favors for itself. The church also has been protected from the self-corruption that seems to result when it falls for this politicized temptation and has the power to pursue it. At the same time the nation has been shaped positively by the moral convictions of its people, whether they were derived from recognizable creeds or not.

RELATIVISM

Relativism is a far-reaching philosophical doctrine providing a certain interpretation of pluralism. It is one of several possible ways to evaluate the plurality of beliefs.

Let us look first negatively, at what relativism denies, then positively at what it affirms. It denies that anyone religion or philosophy can make truth claims that are absolute. There are no absolutes. We can speak about God, but there is no way of knowing if what is said about him actually corresponds to who he is in fact, if any God exists at all. The idea that there could be one knowable and constant truth about ultimate things is seen as naive and ethnocentric. All claims to truth are just "relative to" whatever set of local and historical factors produced them - social, psychological or economic. There is no trans-cultural standard by which religions and philosophies can be judged for truthfulness.

Positively, relativism asserts that each religion and philosophy is an attempt by an individual or group to name the unnamable from its own limited perspective. The content of each belief system is not important, because it is accidental to the particular culture in which it arose.

Each religion or philosophy does more or less the same job, but in different ways. Each expresses human longings for the ultimate or absolute, and supplies social and psychological stability. It is proper to speak of a religious teaching being more or less helpful in achieving a social or psychological goal, but absurd to talk of one as true and another as false. We do not talk of chocolate ice cream being true ice cream and vanilla as false, although we probably like one more than the other. They both fulfill the same function in only slightly different ways. So also, the relativist says, it is foolish to speak as if true and false were measures of religion. The only "wrong" that we are likely to commit, according to the relativist, is to condemn or judge the beliefs of another. This is a failure of openness, caused by ethnocentrism and bigotry.

Relativism refuses to be relativized

Confusion is guaranteed unless we realize that relativism works at two levels in many of our discussions. On the one level, it is a philosophical doctrine, one among other contenders. But on the other level, it is a meta-philosophy, telling us how to understand all doctrines from all sources. This explains why it can sound so humble one minute, as if only the relativist has taken human fallibility fully into account, but can sound so arrogant the next minute, as if the relativist alone has been granted a vision of ultimate truth. It is one view, but demands to be the paradigm through which all views are known.

As we have seen, the cutting edge of relativism's critique is to say that all ultimate religious and philosophical beliefs are properly understood not as possible sources of true knowledge about God or ultimate truth, but as only products of their culture's groping to name the unnamable. But at the same time, relativism claims for itself immunity from the force of its own critique. We are meant to believe that it alone is not just a product of the relativizing factors in its own (modern, Western, academic, tenure-seeking) culture, but that it is in some mysterious sense, objectively, timelessly true. It comes to us through an epistemological immaculate perception, whereby it miraculously escapes the acid bath of relativizing analysis. This is the "overbite" of relativism.

Relativism destroys pluralism

Although relativism is known for celebrating pluralism, in fact it does no such thing. Let me give you an example. Think of the common illustration of religious relativism that we have all heard - that the various world religions are like different roads up the same mountain. Although the travelers on each road cannot see others on different roads as they ascend, they all meet at the top (at God?). That analogy seems to bring a fair-minded and

democratic perspective to the plurality of religious options, but it is deceptive. The one who believes it has created a meta-religion, a paradigm which claims to interpret all religions.

It is the one correct doctrine with which to understand plurality. As such, it is anything but relativistic - it is the absolute. It assumes that the relativist is not a mere human traveler (with limited vision) on one of the roads, but that he or she has an airplane's view of the whole mountain and those climbing it, and can therefore tell us how to understand God and our search for him. The most important point of the analogy, the extraordinary location of the teller, is usually missed especially by the person telling it

The mountain analogy shows that relativism excludes true pluralism, and also that it is condescending to it. It is O.K. to be on our own little road up the mountain, as long as we realize that the beliefs and practices that are found on our road are only our private preferences, derived from our culture or state of mind. The beliefs are not true in the sense that they correspond to who God actually is and how we are to know him. Relativism allows plurality only in the private world of opinions that have no public factual status, but insists on uniformity when we come to ultimate truth that does have factual status.

Despite relativism's celebration of pluralism, in fact it does not even tolerate pluralism, except in this token and condescending way. Pluralism states that there is a plurality of religious and philosophical options. Relativism, rightly understood, argues that there is not in fact a plurality of ultimate truths at all, but only one single ultimate truth that explains all the other pretenders. One is left not with plurality, but with uniformity at the level of ultimate belief. Again, the absolutism of relativism.

For example, it sounds very high-minded to say that what is important in religion is the common ingredient of reaching out toward the Absolute - and not doctrine, ethics, or sacramental practices. But this is not so open and pluralistic as it seems. However, many of the people in the various religions of the world do not perceive themselves in that way - many are willing to die for their distinct and particular beliefs, ethics, and some even for their places of worship. Actually, it is more high-handed than high-minded. To say that Christianity (which believes in a personal God) and Buddhism (which denies a personal God and is equivocal about belief in an impersonal God) are really the same in the most important points, is a denial of the plurality that is there. It is an imposition of uniformity from on high.

The controversy over the idea of conversion

Have you ever wondered why words such as "conversion", "proselytize" or "born again" are now swear and smear words? Why are they so offensive? One answer would be that they have been so trivialized by those who use them most, that they now have a bad smell. That might be partly true, but there is a deeper reason, and it is not because of our profound commitment to pluralism. In fact, it is just the opposite. I would suggest instead that it is actually because people are afraid to deal with pluralism's implications that the idea of conversion is such a threat.

Honest recognition of pluralism admits that there are religious differences and that they run deep. But belief in serious differences between religions provides a logic to the idea of conversion, and drops hard choices into our laps. It is far more comforting to believe the relativist who assures us that all roads lead to the same place. This means that there is no need to be anxious about real commitment to any one God or ultimate truth.

C.S. Lewis described his relief at the abandonment of the Christian faith of his early years: "I was soon (in the famous words) altering 'I believe' to 'one does feel'. And oh the relief of

it! ... From the tyrannous noon of revelation I passed into the cool evening twilight of Higher Thought, where there was nothing to be obeyed, and nothing to be believed except what was either comforting or exciting." There is a certain comfort in believing that the highest authority to which we might ever be answerable is our own subjective moral consciousness.

Relativism is the real opiate of the people. It discourages serious discussion of the most important issues, and dampens the challenges of pluralism, enabling people to sleepwalk through the most important choices of their lives. The questions having to do with God's existence and character are no longer urgent, since they are matters not of truth, but only of private opinion and preference, and have no final consequence.

If, however, pluralism really does exist at the level of ultimate truth, then honesty dictates that we take that plurality seriously. In fact, there are differences in ultimate outlook that are difficult to deny. There is a difference between a God who is personal, a God who is impersonal and the absence of God altogether. There is a difference between a final judgement after death, a series of many reincarnations, and simple cessation of consciousness. The cause of mutual understanding is not served by pretending that these are superficial or negligible differences.

If there are real and important differences between religious positions, then why should talk of "conversion" and associated words be such contemporary heresy? In fact, if religious pluralism is real, why is the idea of conversion or even proselytizing strange at all? It makes sense in a world in which religious differences are real and important. Why should they not be important enough for me to change basic commitments in my life? The differences might even be important enough for me to try to persuade some one else of the truth that I have come to believe in. If we really believe in pluralism, why should this be considered barbaric or even odd?

What makes sense given the assumption of pluralism, is of course strange even to the point of seeming pathological if relativism is true. We must decide which model we will follow. If we believe that there is a genuine plurality of religious beliefs, it opens up an sorts of hard discussions. Which one or ones is true? Are there elements of several that are true? How do we know? Does being wrong make any difference? Because these questions are difficult, can be divisive, and do force us to reflect on the scope and consequence of our lives, we tend to hide from them. But the alternative to engaging in them is to ban the categories of truth and falsehood from religious discussion altogether. This seems arbitrary, high-handed and finally dishonest.

My fear is that relativism is more a source of confusion than a necessary platform for honest dialogue. My plea is for a respect for honest pluralism and for trying to build an atmosphere of civility as we openly, courageously and humbly speak about our deepest differences.

TOLERANCE

Tolerance is living side by side with others who have real and deep differences with us, but living with respect and civility in our personal attitude, and as much as is possible, in public policy (e.g. in public policy our tolerance for murderers and thieves will be a limited tolerance). Tolerance is not relativism and has no necessary relationship to relativism. A common confusion today is to think that if you question relativism, you must be intolerant and anti-democratic. As I have tried to show, relativism itself is less inclusive than it claims. However, we will find both tolerant and intolerant people holding to all religious and philosophical persuasions.

There are some sad chapters in our own Christian history at this point (as there are in all other world religions and secular ideologies). Christians started out being persecuted, but when they got sufficient political power, they quickly became persecutors. Christians have sometimes been cruel and arrogant to those who did not agree with them, and have at times corrupted the integrity of their own faith by their misuse of the coercive powers of the state when they had access to them.

Followers of Christ are called to live with faith and patience, love their enemies, seek the welfare of those who would do them evil, and be salt and light in the world. Jesus and the whole the New Testament encourages the very kind of tolerance that I have outlined. But tolerance does not require that we treat the status quo as sacred, as if we were morally obliged to refrain from trying to change ourselves, others or society. Tolerance does not demand that we never try to persuade some one of the truth of an important idea. It does demand that we hold that person in respect in spite of areas of disagreement, and perhaps especially if we would try to persuade them to change - whether it be in matters of personal faith, ethics or social justice.

If freedom of conscience is a substantial reality, each person can best make up his or her mind without unnecessary extrinsic or coercive pressures confusing that already difficult process. The more important one believes the religious differences to be, the more one ought to be committed to safe-guarding freedom of conscience for all in questions of belief.

Pluralism is with us, and whether we like it or not, will not go away. Relativism - especially when it is confused with pluralism and tolerance, is an inherently misleading and unstable doctrine and is ultimately itself intolerant. Tolerance we must strive for because it is rooted in a respect for each human being and for the significance of his or her choices.

We stand at an extraordinary time in history.

Admittedly the church is weak and has lost the position of leadership it once enjoyed. But this is not to say the Christian Faith itself is weak. In fact it is our conviction that only the Christian Faith has the metaphysical and moral vision to make the world safe for pluralism at its best - and to avoid the poles of anarchy and despotism (1 Tim 2.1-2). Nor is the Church impotent or beyond revival or reformation.