

Relativism, Truth, and Faith

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1. Christian faith and the challenge of relativism

These reflections take as their starting point teachings of Benedict XVI, but make no attempt to offer a complete explanation of his thought on this question.² On various occasions and in different words, Benedict XVI has expressed his conviction that relativism has become the central problem confronting the Christian faith today.³ Some people in the media have interpreted these words as referring almost exclusively to the area of morality, as though intended to vilify anyone who refuses to accept specific points of the Catholic Church's moral teaching. But this interpretation is erroneous, since relativism is a much broader and deeper problem, manifested primarily in the philosophical and religious domains. It refers to *the deep-seated attitude that contemporary men and women, both believers and non-believers, easily assume in relation to the truth.*

The reference to a deep-seated attitude towards the truth distinguishes relativism from error. Error is compatible with a sound attitude towards the truth. A person who affirms, for example, that the Church was not founded by Jesus Christ, may say this because he thinks (mistakenly) that it is the truth and that the opposite thesis is false. The one making an affirmation of this type thinks that it is possible to attain the truth. Those who attain it, and in the degree to which they attain it, are right, and those who sustain the contrary affirmation are mistaken.

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² We will focus on the following texts: Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2004; homily at the Missa pro eligendo Romano Pontifice celebrated in the Vatican Basilica on April 18, 2005; and the important Christmas Address of Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005.

³ Cf. for example Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, p. 117. See also the homily mentioned above, given on April 18, 2005.

Relativistic philosophy, in contrast, claims that we have to resign ourselves to the fact that divine realities and those touching on the deepest meaning of human life, both personal and social, are substantially inaccessible, and that no single approach to them exists. Every epoch, every culture and every religion have used different concepts, images, symbols, metaphors, visions, etc. to express them. These cultural expressions may be opposed to one another, but in relation to the realities to which they refer they are all of equal value. They are all diverse paths, defined by specific cultures and historical periods, for alluding in a very imperfect way to realities that are essentially unknowable. Thus no conceptual or religious system possesses an absolute truth value. All are relative to their historical moment and cultural context; hence their diversity and even mutual opposition. But within the ambit of this relativity, *all are equally valid, insofar as they are different and complementary ways of approaching the same reality that substantially remains hidden.*

In a book published before his election, Benedict XVI refers to a Buddhist parable.⁴ A king in northern India once gathered together a number of blind men who did not know what an elephant was. He had some of the blind men touch the head of the elephant and told them: “This is an elephant.” He said the same thing to the others as he told them to touch the trunk, or the ears, or the feet, or the hairs at the end of the elephant’s tail. Then the king asked the blind men what an elephant was, and each gave a different explanation depending on the part he had been permitted to touch. The blind men began to argue, and the argument became violent, until a fist fight broke out among them, which provided the entertainment the king was seeking.

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This story is a good illustration of relativism. Mankind is blind and runs the danger of absolutizing partial and inadequate knowledge, unaware of its intrinsic limitation (the theoretical foundation of relativism). When we fall into this temptation, we are prone to violent and disrespectful behavior, incompatible with human dignity (ethical foundation of relativism). The logical approach would be to accept the relativism of our ideas, not only because this corresponds to the nature of our limited knowledge, but also in virtue of the ethical imperative of tolerance, dialogue and mutual respect. The relativist philosophy presents itself as the necessary requirement for democracy, mutual respect and coexistence. But it fails to take into account that relativism makes possible mockery and abuse by those in power: in the parable, the king who wants to amuse himself at the expense of the poor blind men. In present day society, we can find the same abuse in those who promote their own interests, whether economic, ideological, political, etc., at the cost of others, through skillful and unscrupulous management of public opinion and the other sources of power.

What does all this have to do with the Christian faith? Quite a lot. For it is essential to Christianity to present itself as *religio vera*, as the true religion.⁵ The Christian faith moves on the plane of truth, which is its “minimal vital space.” The Christian religion is not a myth, nor a conjunction of rites useful for social and political life, nor a

⁴ Cf. Truth and Tolerance, p. 162.

⁵ Cf. Ibid., pp. 162-183.

principle that inspires sound private sentiments, nor an ethical agency for international cooperation. The Christian faith, first of all, communicates the truth about God, although not exhaustively, and the truth about man and the meaning of his life.⁶ The Christian faith is incompatible with the logic of the “as if.” It cannot be reduced to telling ourselves that we have to behave “as if” God had created us, and therefore “as if” all men were brothers. Rather it affirms, as a true claim, that God created heaven and earth and that we are all equally children of God. It also tells us that Christ is the full and definitive revelation of God, “the glory of God and...the very stamp of his nature,”⁷ the only mediator between God and mankind.⁸ Therefore it cannot accept the view that Christ is simply the form under which God has chosen to reveal himself to Europeans.⁹

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We should stress here that coexistence and peaceful dialogue with those who do not have faith, or who sustain other doctrines, is not opposed to Christianity; rather just the opposite is true. What is incompatible with Christian faith is the claim that Christianity, the other monotheistic or non-monotheistic religions, the monistic oriental mysticisms, atheism, etc. are equally true, since they are diverse ways, each limited by specific cultural and historical circumstances, of referring to the same reality, which none manages to truly capture. That is to say, *the Christian faith would dissolve if on the theoretical plane one were to lose the perspective of truth according to which those who affirm and deny the same thing cannot be equally right, or be considered as complementary visions of the same reality.*

2. Religious relativism

The strength of Christianity, and its power to guide and heal personal and collective life, consists in a close synthesis between faith, reason, and life.¹⁰ Religious faith reveals to each person that true reason is love and that love is true reason.¹¹ This synthesis is broken if reason is viewed as relativistic. Thus relativism has become the central problem that evangelization has to confront in our day and age. For relativism brings with it a deeply disordered stance with regard to truth, manifested in all facets of life.

⁶ The knowledge of God that faith gives us is not exhaustive because in heaven we will know God much better. Nevertheless, what Revelation tells us is true, and it is all that God wanted to tell us about himself. There is no other source to know more truths about God nor are there other revelations.

⁷ Heb 1:3.

⁸ Cf. 1 Tim 2:5.

⁹ This thesis was defended at the beginning of the twentieth century by Ernst Troeltsch Cf. *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte*, Mohr, Tübingen, 1929.

¹⁰ This idea is found throughout *Truth and Tolerance*.

¹¹ *Truth and Tolerance*, p. 175.

In the first place we find today a relativist interpretation of religion. It is what is known as “the theology of religious pluralism,” which affirms that religious pluralism is not only a *de facto* reality, but a *de jure* one. God is seen as positively wanting non-Christian religions as different paths by which men and women can unite with him and receive salvation, independent of Christ. Christ at most has a position of special importance, but he is only one of many possible paths, and therefore neither exclusive nor inclusive of the rest. All religions are partial ways to God; all can learn from the others something of the truth about God, and in all (or in many of them) one finds a true divine revelation.

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This position rests upon the presupposition of the historical and cultural relativity of God’s salvific action in Jesus Christ. The universal salvific action of God is realized through various limited forms, according to the diversity of peoples and cultures, without identifying itself fully with any of them. The absolute truth about God cannot have an adequate and sufficient expression in history and in human language, always limited and relative. Christ’s actions and words are subject to that relativity, in a way analogous to the actions and words of other great religious figures. Christ does not have an absolute and universal value, since nothing that happens in history can have such value.¹² Many different ways exist for trying to explain this view of God’s salvific action.¹³

The encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*¹⁴ of Pope John Paul II and the declaration *Dominus Iesus*¹⁵ confront these complex theories. It is easy to see that such theological positions dissolve Christology and relativize Christ’s revelation, which is viewed as limited, incomplete and imperfect,¹⁶ thus opening the way for other independent and autonomous revelations.¹⁷ What holds pride of place in these theories is *the ethical imperative of dialogue* with the representatives of the great Asian religions, which would not be possible if one did not accept, as a point of departure, that these religions have

¹² A defense of the pluralist thesis can be found in: Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes towards the World Religions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll (NY) 1985; John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion Human Responses to the Transcendent*, Yale University press, London 1989; Michael Amaladoss, *The Pluralism of Religions and the Significance of Christ*, in *Making All Things New: Dialogue, Pluralism and Evangelization in Asia*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 1990, pp. 243-268; *Mission and Servanthood*, “Third Millennium” 2 (1999) 59-66; *Jésus Christ, le seul sauveur, et la mission*, “Spiritus” 159 (2000) 148-157; “Do Not Judge...” (*Mt 7:1*), “Jeevadhara” 31/183 (2001) 179-182; Felix Wilfred, *Beyond Settled Foundations. The Journey of Indian Theology*, Madras, 1993.

¹³ Some claim that the Word not incarnated, *Lógos ásarkos* or *Lógos cosmico*, carries out a much broader salvific action than that of the Word Incarnate, the *Logos ensarkos* (cf. for example Jacques Dupuis, *Verso una teologia del pluralismo religioso*, Queriniana, Brescia 2997, p. 404). Others claim that the Holy Spirit carries out a salvific action that is separate from that of Christ, attributing the autonomous salvific value of the non-Christian religions and the true revelation contained in them to the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴ Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, on the permanent validity of the missionary mandate, December 7, 1990.

¹⁵ Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration “*Dominus Iesus*” on the unicity and the salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, August 6, 2000.

¹⁶ Cf. Dupuis, *Verso una teologia del pluralismo religioso*, cit., p. 367 and 403.

¹⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 332 and 342.

an autonomous salvific value, not derived from or directed towards Christ. Also in this case a theoretical (dogmatic) relativism is to a great extent dictated by a practical imperative (that of dialogue).

We should clarify here that what we have just said in no way prejudices the salvation of those without faith in Christ. Non-Christians who live an upright life in accord with their conscience are also saved by Christ and in Christ, although they do not know him here on earth. Christ is the universal Redeemer and Savior of the human race. He is the salvation of all who are saved.

3. Ethical-Social Relativism

We will now go on to consider ethical-social relativism. By this expression we want to point out not only that today's relativism has many evident manifestations in the ethical-social order, but also, and principally, that *it presents itself as justified by ethical-social reasons*. This explains both the ease with which it has spread and the ineffectiveness of certain attempts to combat it.

Habermas formulates an ethical-social justification for relativism in the following way. In present-day society we find a pluralism of conceptions of and ways of living the human good. This puts us before a clear alternative: either we renounce the classical pretension of pronouncing value judgments on the various lifestyles that experience offers us, or we renounce defending the ideal of tolerance, according to which every philosophy of life has the same worth as any other, or, at least, all have the same right to exist.¹⁸ The force of this kind of reasoning lies in the fact that historically men have often violently “sacrificed freedom on the altar of truth.” Thus it is easy to seem to be defending freedom, while actually falling into the opposite extreme of violently “sacrificing truth on the altar of freedom.”

This can be clearly seen in the way a relativistic mentality attacks its adversaries. To those who affirm, for example, that heterosexuality is of the essence of marriage, the claim is not made that this thesis is false. Rather those who hold it are accused of religious fundamentalism, intolerance, or an anti-modern spirit. Much less is there any attempt to defend the contrary thesis. The characteristic of the relativist mentality is to say that this thesis is one that happens to exist in society, together with its contrary, and perhaps with others, and that all of them in the end are of equal value and have the same right to be socially recognized. Those defending relativism don't oblige anyone to get married to a person of the same sex, but anyone who wants to do this should be free to do so. This is the same reasoning used to justify the legalization of abortion and other attacks against the human life of persons who, because of their situation, cannot actively vindicate their rights and whose collaboration is not necessary to us. No one is obliged to have an abortion, but those who want to should be able to attain one.

The relativist mentality is open to many different criticisms. But what one should never do is to reinforce, with one's words or attitudes, what is most persuasive

¹⁸ Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Aclaraciones a la ética del discurso*, Trotta, Madrid, 2000, pp. 93-94 (original: *Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1991).

in that mentality. That is to say, whoever attacks relativism should never give the impression that he is disposed to sacrifice freedom on the altar of truth. Rather one should make clear that one is very aware that the move from the theoretical perspective to the ethical-political perspective has to be done with great care. It is one thing to refuse to accept that those who affirm and deny the same thing can be equally correct; quite other is the thesis that only those who think in a particular way should enjoy all the rights of civil freedom under the law. All confusion between the theoretical plane

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and the ethical-political plane should be avoided. The relationship of conscience with truth is one thing, while justice among people is something quite different. Following this logic one can then show, in a credible way, that in regard to an affirmation that tries to say how the world is, that is, in regard to a speculative thesis, one can only say that it is true or false. Speculative theses are neither strong nor weak, neither private nor public, neither cold nor hot, neither violent nor peaceful, neither authoritarian nor democratic, neither progressive nor conservative, neither good nor bad. They are simply true or false.

What would we think of someone who, when explaining a mathematical proof or giving a medical explanation, would begin by saying that this scientific knowledge only has a private validity, or that it represents a deeply democratic theory? If there is complete certainty that a particular medicine will stop a tumor from growing, one is dealing with a medical truth, and there is nothing more to say. In contrast one can view a way of conceiving civil rights or the structure of the state as authoritarian or democratic, as just or unjust, as conservative or reformist. At the same time, there are realities such as marriage which are both an object of true knowledge and of practical regulation in accord with justice. In case of conflict, one has to find a way of saving both truth and justice among persons, for which one has to take into account, among other things, the “expressive” or educational value of civil laws.¹⁹

In his address on December 22, 2005, Benedict XVI distinguished very clearly between the need to defend the truth and the need to seek justice among men and women. Here is a very significant paragraph: “If religious freedom were to be considered an expression of the human inability to discover the truth and thus become a canonization of relativism, then this social and historical necessity is raised inappropriately to the metaphysical level and thus stripped of its true meaning. Consequently, it cannot be accepted by those who believe that the human person is capable of knowing the truth about God and, on the basis of the inner dignity of the truth, is bound to this knowledge. It is quite different, on the other hand, to perceive religious freedom as a need that derives from human coexistence, or indeed, as an intrinsic consequence of the truth that cannot be externally imposed but that the person must adopt only through the process of conviction. The Second Vatican

¹⁹ The “expressive” aspect of civil laws refers to the undeniable fact that the law, in addition to permitting or forbidding something, expresses a conception of human life and marriage, and thus has an educational impact of either a positive or negative character.

Council, recognizing and making its own an essential principle of the modern state with the *Decree on Religions Freedom*, has recovered the deepest patrimony of the Church.”²⁰

Benedict XVI goes on to say that “those who expected that with this fundamental ‘yes’ to the modern era all tensions would be dispelled and that the ‘openness towards the world’ accordingly achieved would transform everything into pure harmony, had underestimated the inner tensions as well as the contradictions inherent in the modern epoch. They had underestimated the perilous frailty of human nature which has been a threat to human progress in all the periods of history.” And while affirming that “the Council could not have intended to abolish the Gospel’s opposition to human dangers and errors,”²¹ he also said that one needs to strive to do everything possible to overcome “erroneous or superfluous contradictions in order to present to our world the requirement of the Gospel in its full greatness and purity.”²² And he stressed that “the steps the Council took towards the modern era which had rather vaguely been presented as ‘openness to the world,’ belong in short to the perennial problem of the relationship between faith and reason that is re-emerging in ever-new forms.”²³

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4. Anthropological problems of relativism

We have said that relativism in the ethical-social terrain stems from a practical motive: permitting people to do whatever they desire, as long as it doesn’t harm others, which is seen as an expansion of freedom. But the relativistic mentality brings with it a deep anthropological disorder, with steep personal and social costs. Here I will mention only two aspects of this complex problem.

The first is that the relativist mentality is united to an excessive accentuation of the technical dimension of the human intellect and of the impulses connected to the expansion of the ego with which this dimension of the intellect is related, with the corresponding suppression of the intellect’s sapiential dimension.

What is here referred to as “the technical dimension of the human intellect,” which other authors call by different names,²⁴ is the activity of the intellect that permits us to orientate ourselves in our surroundings, guarantying the satisfaction of our basic necessities. The intellect forms concepts, discovers relationships, recognizes the order of things, etc. for the purpose of controlling and exploiting nature, making tools and obtaining the resources that we need. Thanks to this function of the intellect the

²⁰ Benedict XVI, Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Philipp Lersch calls it the *intellectual function* of the intellect, and terms what we call the “sapiential dimension” the *spiritual function* of the intellect. Cf. Lersch, Philipp, Ph., *La estructura de la personalidad*, 4th ed., Scientia, Barcelona 1963, pp. 399-404.

objects and forces of nature become objects that we can control and manipulate for our own benefit. From this perspective, to know is power: power to control, power to manipulate, power to live better.

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The sapiential function of the intellect, in contrast, seeks to understand the meaning of the world and human life. It develops concepts not for the purpose of controlling but to attain truths about the world that can give a sound answer to the question of the meaning of our existence, an answer that in the long run is as necessary to us as bread and water.

The systematic flight from the plane of truth, which we have termed the relativist mentality, brings with it an imbalance between these two functions of the intellect. The predominance of the technical functions means the predominance at the personal and cultural level of impulses towards the values of pleasure, well-being, possession, absence of sacrifice, etc., by means of which the individual ego is affirmed and expanded. The suppression of the sapiential function of the intellect brings with it the inhibition of the social and altruistic tendencies, and above all a diminishing of the capacity for self-transcendence, as a result of which the person becomes enclosed within the limits of egoistic individualism. Thus the thirst to accumulate, to triumph, to relax and amuse oneself, to live easily and pleasantly, easily prevails over the desire to know, to reflect, to give meaning to what one does, to help others by means of one's work, to transcend the narrow limits of our immediate interests.

The second problem is closely linked with the first. The lack of sensitivity towards the truth and towards questions related to the meaning of human life leads to the deformation, if not the corruption, of freedom—of one's own freedom first of all. It is no surprise that social and legal expressions of lifestyles congruent with this anthropological disorder are always based on a call for freedom, a reality which is certainly sacrosanct, but which has to be understood in its true meaning. People invoke freedom as freedom to abort, freedom to be misinformed, freedom to be vile, freedom to refuse to give any reason for one's own positions, freedom to annoy others and, above all, freedom to impose on others a relativist philosophy. Anyone who refuses to accept this philosophy is subjected to a process of social and cultural “lynching”—the “dictatorship of relativism” pointed to by Benedict XVI.

All this also has many negative implications for the Christian faith. Anyone who thinks that truth exists, and can be attained with certainty even in the midst of many difficulties; anyone who thinks that our capacity to culturally model love, marriage, life, the order of coexistence in the state, etc., is subject to limits that can't be violated, holds that there exists an intellect beyond the human intellect. It is the Creator's intellect that determines the purposes of natural beings and limits our power to change them. The relativist thinks the contrary. Relativism is like agnosticism. Anyone who follows it to the end will find himself much closer to practical atheism.

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It seems to me that the conviction that God created man and woman is incompatible with the idea that marriage between persons of the same sex is possible.²⁵ It would only be possible if marriage were simply a cultural creation structured centuries ago in one way, which we are free to restructure now in another way.

Relativism responds to a radical conception of life which it tries to impose on everyone. *The dogma of relativism affirms that the way to attain the greatest possible happiness in this conflicted world of ours, which is always a limited and fragmentary happiness, is to evade the problem of truth,* viewed as a useless complication and the cause of many headaches.²⁶ Relativism is a dogmatic philosophy of happiness. As such it comes up against the problem that men and women possess an intellect, and that we cannot be happy without knowing the meaning of our life. Aristotle began his *Metaphysics* by saying that every person, by nature, desires to know.²⁷ And Christ taught that “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”²⁸

No coercive force can eliminate from human life the desire to know, or hunger for the word that proceeds from God’s mouth. Therefore I am convinced that ours is a time of hope, and that the future is much more promising than it might appear, provided that those who seek the truth can show others a life that is richer and more human than the life offered by relativism. And this undoubtedly is also a challenge for those who want to help spread the Christian faith in today’s world.

²⁵ *Gen* 1:27-28 and 2:24.

²⁶ The ethical thesis of Greek skepticism is once again resurfacing today: “Whoever holds that something is by nature good or evil, or in general obligatory or prohibited, is subject to many anxieties...If the conviction that some things by nature are either good or bad produces anxiety, then it is also bad to assume and hold firmly that something is objectively bad or good.” (Sexto Empírico, *Esbozos pirrónicos*, Biblioteca Clásica Gredos, Madrid 1993, III, pp. 237-238). For a critique of this position, cf. Antonio Rodríguez Luño, *Ética General*, 5th ed., Eunsa, Pamplona 2004, pp. 134-138.

²⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 1:980 a 1.

²⁸ *Mt* 4:4.