

# RELATIVISM AND REVELATION

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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In 1950 Pope Pius XII published a famous letter or encyclical called 'Humani Generis' in which he warned Roman Catholics against relativism in doctrine (paragraph 16). Relativism is the name for the attitude which denies that there are absolute or fixed standards for thought or behaviour. The Pope warned that relativism was making inroads into Roman Catholic theology from current non-Christian philosophical thinking, which denies the existence of God, who is the only ultimate standard of reference. Relativism is characterized by a denial of absolute standards. In its view nothing is unchanging, neither truth nor law, but all is relative, because its standard of reference is human society and human thought, and this is always changing.

The Pope issued his timely warning in 1950. Since then the inroads of relativism have continued to undermine

the absolute character of Christian doctrine and morality, not only in the Church of Rome but even more, I am sorry to say, in Protestantism, where there are several schools of thought which deny a supernatural God.

For example, the object of the Bishop of Woolwich's book 'Honest to God' is to demolish what Bishop Robinson calls 'The God Out There' and to substitute what he calls 'the ground of our being' as the only known God. He would find God wholly within nature, rather than One who transcends nature. As he himself put it, the book is "my questioning of the necessity of the 'supernaturalistic' cast of thought by which the reality of God in human experience is represented by the existence of gods or of a God in some other realm 'above' or 'beyond' the world in which we live." ('The New Reformation' p.13). When this principle of relativism is applied to morality it means that all absolute standards of

behaviour are abandoned in favour of one's own personal judgment in each situation.

Relativism and historical Christianity are diametrically opposed; one must drive out the other, because relativism makes our own experiences the point of reference to arrive at the truth and this means a constantly changing view of truth. Christianity, however, makes the unchanging mind of God the standard of reference by which truths and actions are judged. Christianity affirms that God has made His mind known to us in a clear and reliable way in His Word and supremely He has made His mind known to us through Himself taking human nature, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, so that we behold His glory, full of grace and truth (John 1). In God's Word, that is in Jesus Christ and in the inspired Scripture, we have an absolute standard. It must be absolute if it is indeed the Word of God, for God's mind is the standard by

which everything else is judged. This absolute truth is unchanging, because God is unchangeable. Historical Christianity can find no place for the principle of relativism either in its doctrine of God or in the rules for Christian behaviour, but it insists that views of God, and of conduct are conformable to the unchangeable revelation of God in Christ, which is conveyed to us in the inspired Scripture.

However, as I say, the principle of relativism is extraordinarily popular not only in the non-Christian philosophical world but even within the world of Christian thinkers. Relativism cannot tolerate absolutes. It is not surprising then that Christian theologians who have embraced relativism in order to be in the swim with modern thought are bound to minimise and in the end to deny the inspiration of Scripture, for if Scripture is God's Word it is quite plainly an absolute

standard.

Relativism cannot stop at the denial of the inspiration of Scripture, it must go on and deny the deity of Christ, for if God has entered our world in Christ here again is an absolute standard to which we must all bow the knee and bring our thoughts into conformity. It is not surprising then that in much modern Christian theology Christ's deity is minimised and His miracles, especially His resurrection, outrightly denied.

Relativism must in the end finish up with the denial of God Himself as in the 'God is Dead' school of theologians in America, for by definition, God is absolute and His mind is the standard for everything. Thorough going relativism must be atheistic.

The inroads of relativism into Christian theology mean that the Christian life of faith and obedience becomes

impossible, for faith is quite different from superstition, which is a common element in the religions of the world - the believing things about this and the believing things about that. Faith is personal trust and commitment to someone whom you know and in whose character you have absolute confidence. Christian faith is exemplified in our Lord's words to His disciples "The cup which my Father has given me shall I not drink it?" Faith and obedience imply a standard made known to us which we accept as true and commit our lives to it. But relativism replaces faith and obedience by prudence. For if we have no absolute standard, but have only our own opinions and the opinions of society around us to be our guide, prudence takes the place of obedience; we have to do what seems best to us, rather than obeying an absolute standard.

Relativism not only denies the inspiration of

Scripture and the full deity of Christ but it also denies the doctrine of revelation, because revelation means that God has made known His mind, and by definition His mind is the absolute standard on all matters throughout His creation. Thus relativism and revelation are contradictory concepts. The Christian religion has always been a religion of revelation, and therefore can find no place for relativism in doctrine or in morals. The Christian religion affirms in the fullest sense the doctrine that God has spoken. Thus the Lord Jesus Christ asked the Sadducees in Mt. 22:31 "Have you never read what was spoken unto you by God?" In these words Jesus affirmed that the Sadducees had available to them in the written words of Scripture, the mind of God. And the Epistle to the Hebrews begins with a clear affirmation that God has spoken both through the prophets and principally through His Son: "God, who at sundry times and

in divers manners sapke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son". This passage, and there are many others like it in the Bible, clearly enunciates the fact of revelation - God has made known His mind to us. If this is so then we have an absolute standard. We may grow in the understanding of it but we cannot alter the standard itself for it is the unchanging mind of God made known to us through the prophets, through His Son and brought to us in the God-breathed words of Scripture. It is our task humbly and prayerfully and in the fellowship of our fellow Christians within the church to seek to understand this mind of Scripture and then to conform our thoughts and behaviour to it. None of us dare neglect the duty of reading the Bible ourselves and praying to God to help us do His will as it is there revealed. No preacher should by-pass his duty of explaining revelation as contained in

the Scripture to the congregation and laying it on their consciences to conform their lives and their homes to this mind of God. And it is the duty of the whole community to conform to the mind of God as revealed in Scripture and it does not matter that Christians may be in a minority it still behoves us to remind our fellows that God has made His mind known to us and it is the duty of all of us to conform to it.

Christianity is based on revelation. Much modern Christian theology is in effect anti-Christian insofar as it proceeds on the principle that we do not have any authoritative revelation and so it endorses relativism. But there is no reconciliation between a religion which is based on the principles of relativism which makes our own opinions and experiences the standard for arriving at truth and the Christian religion which since the time of Abraham has been based on the belief that God

has spoken to us and that now in Jesus Christ He has taken our nature and revealed Himself to us completely and fully. As St. Paul puts it "In Christ the whole fulness of the Godhead dwelt bodily. Jesus Christ is God. If we believe in Jesus in this way then we must make it our full-time business to understand and to follow that revelation of the mind of God which He so graciously made known to us, and in this way we will enter into fellowship with God, through forgiveness. This is the Christian religion.

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