

## The Dictatorship of Relativism

On Monday April 18, 2005, the day before he was elected to become Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger gave an address that warned the world about a new threat to human freedom and dignity. In his own lifetime he has witnessed how twisted ideologies, like storms at sea, have tossed about the human family from one extreme to another: “From Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism<sup>1</sup> and so forth. Every day new sects spring up, and what St. Paul says about human deception and the trickery that strives to entice people into error comes true.”<sup>2</sup> The passage he cites is Ephesians 4:14, “so that we may no longer be children, tossed back and forth and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.” Isn’t this an apt depiction of challenges we face?

Those who promote these modern ideologies contemptuously label as fundamentalists those who root their faith on fixed, immutable beliefs. This pejorative term is intended to discredit those whom they depict as naïve fools because they adhere to an immutable set of beliefs that are wholly out of step with the values of the secular world. In this way no attempt is made to grapple with the truths that underpin their unchangeable beliefs, which are merely dismissed as irrelevant. For example, the historical evidence that supports the credibility of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is not even considered much less examined, while a gratuitous assumption is made that it is a myth. Yet, these same “intellectuals” fall over themselves to give credibility to the arrival on earth of aliens, which has less evidential support than does as the existence of the tooth fairy - after all, the children do find money under their pillow.

Ironically for many of the so-called intelligentsia, being “tossed back and forth and carried about with every wind of doctrine” seems to be the only attitude they believe can cope with modern times. These relativists have but one creed, namely, there are *absolutely no absolutes*, the contradictory nature of which escapes them. Relativism leads to the irrational position that nothing is definite, therefore man’s “ultimate goal consists solely in satisfying one’s own ego and desires.”<sup>3</sup> This world view calls to mind a saying and a child’s fable. The adage comes from William T. Stace: “As a rule, only very learned and clever men deny what is obviously true. Common men have less brains, but more sense.”<sup>4</sup> The child’s fable is Hans Christian Anderson’s *The Emperor’s New Clothes*.

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<sup>1</sup> The word “syncretism” means “combining.” In theology is it the attempt to merge and analogize different and even contradictory ideas by seeking an underlining unity that allows an inclusive approach to other faiths. The end result of this approach is to negate truth except perhaps for the broad and vague underlining unity. On a popular level it is expressed by the statement, “You have your truth and I have my truth,” which undermines the idea of truth and ultimately reduces everything to relativism.

<sup>2</sup> “Homily,” Cardinal Ratzinger, Vatican Basilica, Monday, April 18, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> “Homily,” Cardinal Ratzinger, Vatican Basilica, Monday, April 18, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Cited from “Introduction: The Dictatorship of Relativism,” *The New Criterion*, January 2009.

The effort by relativists to impose their distorted ideas on others led Cardinal Ratzinger to warn about the “dictatorship of relativism.”<sup>5</sup> This is an apt term because it identifies a real danger that impinges on human freedom. At this point it is useful to recall the viewpoint of Benito Mussolini, a relativist who attempted his own dictatorship: “If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories and [for] men who claim to be bearers of an external objective truth, then there is nothing more relativistic than *fascist* attitudes.”<sup>6</sup>

Clearly Ratzinger articulates a very different worldview that transcends self-glorification and the ever changing fads of modern society. He wrote: “All people desire to leave a lasting mark. But what endures? Money does not. Even buildings do not, nor books. After a certain time, longer or shorter, all these things disappear. The only thing that lasts for ever is the human soul, the human person created by God for eternity. The fruit that endures is therefore all that we have sown in human souls: love, knowledge, a gesture capable of touching hearts, words that open the soul to joy in the Lord. So let us go and pray to the Lord to help us bear fruit that endures. Only in this way will the earth be changed from a valley of tears to a garden of God.”<sup>7</sup> Relativists not only reject this philosophy, they attempt to force others to either accept their world view or at least to remain silent.

Evidence of the dictatorship of relativism abounds. There are determined forces in our country, for example, to exclude religious beliefs and expressions from public discourse, to privatize it and even to paint it as a threat to equality and liberty. Yet authentic religion guarantees liberty and assigns to each person an unrepeatable value. Relativists demand “that when religious faith comes into conflict with non-faith, faith must give way. When belief comes into conflict with unbelief, belief must give way. When religion comes into conflict with anti-religion, religion must step down.”<sup>8</sup> In the West relativism has become a pseudo civil religion.

The appeal of relativism is its false promise of liberation from so-called “oppressive” moral constraints, but the evidence of history amply demonstrates relativism rapidly leads to eliminating classes of “unworthy” people, for example, unwanted children through abortion, or Jews in gas chambers, or the very old and infirm by euthanasia or outright genocide. Make no mistake; relativism repudiates all natural moral or social binding power that it strives to replace with legal decrees and the sanctions of the state. Thus, as fixed categories of moral absolutes are jettisoned the modern ideals of *pluralism*, *diversity*, and *tolerance* becomes the constellation of virtues that must govern human behavior replacing the virtues of *faith*, *hope*, and *love* that have God as their direct object.

A striking example of the dictatorship of relativism is the position advocated by Professor R. Alta Charo, J.D., who teaches law and bioethics at the University of Wisconsin Law and Medical

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<sup>7</sup> “Homily,” Cardinal Ratzinger, Vatican Basilica, Monday, April 18, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> John Mallon, “Conscience and the Dictatorship of Relativism: Of the Modern Thought Which Claims to Set People Free but Actually Enslaves them.”

Schools in Madison. She proposes that health care professionals should be *forced* by law to violate their consciences in certain cases. Specifically, she proposes that health care professionals should be *legally required* to give referrals for acts that violate their consciences. There are doctors who see no moral difference between shooting a patient on request or performing an abortion. The consciences of these doctors view both acts as murder. According to Charo's proposal a physician would not be forced to perform an abortion if he believes it's murder, but he would be *mandated by law* to make a referral to another physician who will perform the abortion. Let me reframe her position with two concrete historical examples.

First, let's suppose that in Nazi Germany the conscience of those Germans who did not believe in killing Jews was protected, but the law required that they must inform the Gestapo where Jews were hiding so someone else could kill them. Secondly, what if laws enacted in the United States after the Dred Scott decision did not obligate citizens to capture and return runaway slaves if it violated their conscience, but it mandated that they must give a "referral" to someone who would capture and return the runaway to slavery?

In the academic world of higher education, for example, it is a death sentence to a scientific career to even suggest that careful systematic investigation suggests an *intelligent design* of the universe. A number of scientists who made this suggestion lost their positions. In the area of biblical scholarship, it is considered a grave offense<sup>9</sup> to publish a scholarly work that assumes or implies the inspiration and inerrancy of Sacred Scripture and supports objective truth. It is tragic to encounter biblical scholars who hold important chairs in colleges, universities, and seminaries only to devote their energy to destroying the faith of their students so these charges will become as faithless and confused as they are themselves.

In the last century revolutions arose with a common goal – some are still with us today. The common thread was their rejection of God and moral absolutes as they determined to change the world according to their ideas. In the loveless world of their creation it has always lead to tyranny and a culture of death. Now the dictatorship of relativism is pushing our society in the same direction. It's an old battle with a new mask about which Paul warned the Colossians: "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit" (Col 2:8).

During the Saturday night vigil at World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany on August 20, 2005, Pope Benedict XVI offered the young people in attendance (including my daughter Therese) a very different way to change the world: "The saints, as we said, are the true reformers. Now I want to express this in an even more radical way: *only from the saints, only from God* does true revolution come, the definitive way to change the world."

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<sup>9</sup> I considered using the word "sin", but these prophets of relativism deny the existence of sin with, perhaps, the exception of violating mother earth.

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