

## Relativism and God

What is relativism and how does it relate to our understanding of God? Relativism as a philosophy seems to indicate that all points of view are equally valid and that all truth is relative to the individual. Someone who is influenced by the current state of thinking on relativism might employ such expressions as; "That's your truth, not mine", "It's true for you, but not for me" and "There are no absolute truths". The Bible contains many absolute statements about God and truth, such as:

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."<sup>1</sup>

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,<sup>2</sup>

God as described in the Bible is an eternal being who created everything and reigns supreme over all creation.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.<sup>3</sup>

Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
throughout all generations.

Before the mountains were born  
or you brought forth the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.<sup>5</sup>

This God presents a problem to the current popular philosophy of relativism. Let's walk through some of the elements that have contributed to this philosophy.

Protagoras, (480-411BC) a philosopher in ancient times, began his work "Truth" with this now famous statement: "Man is the measure of all things--of things that are, that they are, of things that are not that they are not." This of course is in contrast to the teaching in the Bible which gives God the preeminence. Perhaps the apostle Paul, who was familiar with Greek philosophy, had this quote in mind when he described God in these words:

-the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.<sup>6</sup>

Some label Protagoras "the first sophist". Through most of the history of western thinking few philosophers took this position until relatively recent times. Most philosophers assumed that there is some objective standpoint in relation to which our judgments are definitively true or false. But starting in the nineteenth century this assumption began to be seriously questioned by some important thinkers. And now today a relative view of truth is extremely popular in many circles. Some take this to the extreme and say that no opinion or position is more valid than any other. This extreme position is clearly untenable because of the obvious logical contradiction.

Nonetheless, relativism can be an extremely useful philosophical concept. There are many arenas of thought where relativist thinking is very helpful. Relativism is useful to help people who exist in a specific place and time to understand how reality is different for people in other places and times. Many concepts are certainly best understood as relative. Often absolute statements are a sign of arrogance and narrow mindedness. But it is a grave error to say that there are no absolutes, that there is no absolute "truth". The psalmist wrote in praise of God:

Your righteousness is everlasting  
and your law is true.  
Trouble and distress have come upon me,

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:6

<sup>2</sup> 1 Tim 2:6

<sup>3</sup> Gen 1:1

<sup>4</sup> Ps 90:1-2

<sup>5</sup> Heb 13:8-9

<sup>6</sup> Rom 4:17

but your commands are my delight.  
Your statutes are forever right;  
give me understanding that I may live.  
All your words are true;  
all your righteous laws are eternal.<sup>7</sup>

If you are discussing truth relative to a particular place and time or relative to a particular circumstance, it is important to define the framework you are operating in or in other words to define the underlying assumptions relative to this particular truth. But an absolute truth is valid under any context or set of underlying assumptions. The apostle Paul wrote:

What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar.<sup>8</sup>

There is an additional point I hesitate to bring out, but I only do because it is a popular point that seems to make sense to many who judge by mere appearances rather than a careful examination of the facts. The point some make is that Einstein's theory of relativity supports the idea that all truth is relative. The theory of relativity in fact rests on the absolute truth that the speed of light in a vacuum is a constant. In fact, Albert Einstein in his 1920 publication: *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, chapter VII (Titled: *The Apparent Incompatibility of the Law of Propagation of Light with the Principle of Relativity*) said this:

In short, let us assume that the simple law of the constancy of the velocity of light  $c$  (in vacuum) is justifiably believed by the child at school. Who would imagine that this simple law has plunged the conscientiously thoughtful physicist into the greatest intellectual difficulties?

Einstein (with not a little sarcasm) clearly expresses his dismay that some would attempt to use his theories to throw out the underlying and necessary absolute truth. Everyone is familiar with the concept that when we are looking up at the nighttime sky the light we are seeing from distant stars left that star many years ago. In fact the light from the farthest stars does not reach earth for thousands or billions of years. The Bible makes these statements about God's relationship to space and time:

Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.  
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,"  
even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.<sup>9</sup>

He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.<sup>10</sup>

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ps 119:142-144, 160

<sup>8</sup> Rom 3:3-4

<sup>9</sup> Ps 139:7-12

<sup>10</sup> Eph 4:10

<sup>11</sup> 2 Peter 3:8

You see, I am very excited about the theory of relativity, now science makes it crystal clear that the God of the Bible is not bound by the limitations of this physical universe. What meaning does time have for a being that fills the whole universe? This science confirms and clarifies the truth rather than rendering truth meaningless. Jesus Christ said:

God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than saying “there is no absolute truth”, I am inclined to say that the truth cannot contradict the truth; there will be no disagreement between correctly understood science and correctly understood spiritual truth. Jesus Christ said this to the Father in prayer:

-your word is truth.<sup>13</sup>

The person who believes that “there is no absolute truth” and because of this human philosophy is unable to accept the truth found in God’s word is actually placing human philosophy above God. This is a spiritual stumbling block that must be overcome:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;  
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.<sup>14</sup>

Another point someone influenced by relativism might make, concerning the Bible, is that there are many and various “interpretations” of the text that are all equally valid, rather than recognizing the mind of God. This is another example of placing human wisdom above God. One should view various interpretations as being in various ways either correct or incorrect, or in varying degrees in agreement or in conflict with the mind of God. The apostle Paul illustrates these points so well in First Corinthians chapter two:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written:

"No eye has seen,  
no ear has heard,  
no mind has conceived  
what God has prepared for those who love him"—  
but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

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<sup>12</sup> John 4:24

<sup>13</sup> John 17:17

<sup>14</sup> 1 Cor 1:18-25

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment:

"For who has known the mind of the Lord  
that he may instruct him?"

But we have the mind of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Let's begin to summarize, the modern popular philosophy of relativism is no substitute for the wisdom of God. The idea that there are no absolute truths is in contradiction to the word of God. Failing to acknowledge that God's word is the truth in order to hold onto some human philosophy is foolish:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,  
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.<sup>16</sup>

Foolish, because after this world is gone the word of God will remain. Jesus Christ said:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.<sup>17</sup>

God has made generous promises to those who accept his word. But to those who remain unable to see past the limitation and error of human philosophy and embrace the truth of God from the heart, Jesus Christ says this:

"As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor 2

<sup>16</sup> Prov 1:7

<sup>17</sup> Matt 24:35

<sup>18</sup> John 12:47-48