

RELATIVELY SPEAKING*The Philosophy of Individualism*

Number 21**Editor: Gordon F. Brown, PhD****December 1984**

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ON RELIGION: CHRIST AND CHRISTMAS

Christ and Christmas, it is the season. We will probably all hear proclamations to the effect that Christ should be more visible, or less visible in this season's celebrations. Some will argue a constructive indifference, that Christ is irrelevant to Christmas. Regardless of your own position on the Christ and Christmas issue, it seems that we are all affected by the commercial, legal, and social aspects of this holiday season. Consider an application of the absolute/relative distinction to Christ and Christmas.

Here is an absolute scenario reduced to five steps:

1. You know what is god and what is bad. By definition, bad results in punishment, while goodness results in rewards.
2. You have been bad or sinful (nobody is perfect); thus, you must pay the price for being bad.
3. Christ, who was good, gave himself to be punished in your place—he will pay the price for your sin.
4. In order to close the deal, the offer must be accepted. Christ made the offer, but you must accept the offer before you can benefit from the offer. That is, you must declare that you are bad, that Christ is good, and that you accept his offer to be punished in your place.
5. Christmas is important in that it celebrates the time when God sent his son as a gift to man. Today, we can give each other gifts to show our love for each other, just as God show his love to us.

CHRIST AND CHRISTMAS (Continued)

This absolute scenario can be seen to place considerable importance on (1) the assumption of a knowable right and wrong, and (2) the status of Christ—if Christ was not perfect or the son of God, then the whole argument would seem to collapse. As for our part in this scenario, we are to acknowledge our subservience to God (He is good and we are bad); and we are to assume Christ is our savior.

A few people I know seem to talk consistently with this absolute view of God, Christ, man, and Christmas. However, most of the people I know use the absolute scenario, but not the same characters. As parents, they see their role as instructing their children along the right path (after teaching the concept of right and wrong); they are pleased by the thought that their children will sing praises to them; and like a suffering Christ on the cross, they may even dedicate their lives to rearing their children. Similar applications can be seen in their employer/employee relationships, as well as their views of our legal and other social institutions.

I have generally been frustrated in my attempts to understand how some people seem to blindly commit themselves to the absolute scenario in their family or employment situations, while seemingly being just as blind in rejecting the same scenario in the theological setting—the absolute scenario seems to only make sense to them when they get to be God.

Now for the relative scenario—the common sense or individualism approach reduced to four steps:

1. There is no knowable good or bad—all we ever have are own, individual view of things. I am looking for a way of perceiving things which is satisfying.
2. Christ was a messenger or teacher. He argued that (a) there was a God, (b) any individual could have a personal relationship with that God, and (c) such a relationship was the way to achieving personal satisfaction in life. Also, Christ as a teacher suggested ways in which a person could set up such a relationship.
3. In contrast to the absolute approach, it does not make any difference that Christ was personally. The question is whether or not the message works. It is the message, not the person that is important. Christ was not arguing for his own glorification, but he was arguing that he was a servant who was showing the way for a person to have a full life through a personal relationship with God. His death was not an issue of paying a price, but rather a declaration that the type of relationship he was talking about could become more valued than life (physical) itself.
4. As for Christmas seen as celebrating the birth of Christ, it just isn't very important. The birth or physical person of Christ is significant in the absolute view of Christ as a sacrifice, but it is the message or the directions of the adult Christ that is significant from the relative view of Christ as a teacher.

RELATIVIST OF THE MONTH

We are our choices. Jean Paul Sartre

ON RELIGION: THE BEGINNING POINT—ACCORDING TO THE GOD OF ABRAHAM

Assume that we are all looking for the full life. In this context, consider that there are two primary messages in the Old Testament: (1) that the most fundamental decision we make in our lives is whether we pursue an absolute or relative approach to living; and (2) that the full life and a relationship with God is the result of choosing the relative and avoiding the absolute. For each person, original sin is the choice to pursue an absolute path.

As the writer(s) of the Book of Genesis (*Bible*) put it: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die (2:16). ... "But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die.'" For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (3:4).

To say that again, there is only one thing you cannot do if you want to have a relationship with God—you cannot be an absolutist. That is, you cannot go around saying what is "good" and what is "bad." This absolute approach is often described as idolatry in the *Old Testament* and in the above-cited quote as being "like God." The idolatry sequence is that you first judge something as "good" relative to your own experience, and then you worship this as if it were independent from you. Consequently, you are worshipping your own product. As the creator of the object of worship, you have presented yourself as an alternative to God.

From this point of view, Jews could be seen, not as the "chosen" people, but as the "choosing" people. Their message was unique in that it identified the absolute/relative distinction as the beginning point for understanding.

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ON RELIGION: RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

From a relative view, a personal relationship between God and the individual seems logically essential. The only reality any of us has is our personal perception of the relationship that results from our interaction with someone or something. You can talk with a priest or read the *Bible*, but your faith is in your view of the priest or your view of the *Bible*, and a belief in your own infallibility to pick the right priest or the right book of instruction. Consistent with a relative approach requiring a personal relationship between God and the individual is the suggestion by Christ that "when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father..." (*Matthew 6:6*).

ON RELIGION: RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD (Continued)

Pope John Paul II recently addressed this issue in his "apostolic exhortation" (issued on December 5, 1984, and reported in the *Los Angeles Times* on December 12, 1984). Consistent with the absolute position of the Catholic Church, the Pontiff dismissed the "widespread idea that one can obtain forgiveness directly from God" and exhorted Catholics to confess more to their priests. (To ask God directly for forgiveness is to assume that you can talk directly to God.)

If Catholics assumed that they could take directly to God, as the relativist may agree, such Catholics would be laying the foundation for a belief in a personal relationship with God, and thus a personal reality which would challenge the basic absolute assumption of the Church as the giver of absolute truth to which all people are to be subservient.

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**ON RELIGION: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH—
AN ABSOLUTE APPROACH**

Father Rolf Thomas, a member of the General Council of Opus Dei, was quoted as saying "We are among the most committed defenders of the notion that undebatable truth exists. Doctrine is not debatable, and when doubts arise over what is binding truth, the final word is the Pope's and not some theologian's (*Time*, June 11, 1984).

Regardless of which side of the fence you are on, or whether you choose to straddle the middle, Father Thomas's statement is an example illustrating the significance of the absolute/relative distinction in understanding the major debates of today.

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T A L K B A C K

Jane Buckley Smith, *National Review*

"My brother is most appreciative of your thoughtful letter. He only wishes he had the time to go into the subject with you. Many thanks."

[I sent William Buckley a copy of the last newsletter which included reference to an article written by him. I got a real kick out of receiving the above note—even if I assumed that everyone who writes to him gets a similar one, I still enjoyed it. This seems like a neat opportunity to say that I enjoy all of your comments. GFB]

TALK BACK (Continued)

Barry L. Lockard, State Chairman
Libertarian Party of Massachusetts

"Your newsletter raises important questions about individual rights and freedoms which people need to hear and think about.... May I have permission to reprint the article 'Politics: The Role of Government in Our lives....'"

Len from Altadena, CA

"I thoroughly enjoyed your last issue.... Please place my wife and I on your mailing list...."

[Occasionally, I send a sample copy to persons that may have an interest in being on our mailing list. If you know of anyone you think would like to receive a copy and an invitation to be on our mailing list, let me know. GFB]

Tom from Glendale, CA

"Keep it up! Becoming the gardeners of understanding."

Charles from Stanford, CA

"Thanks for the newsletter. Re: elections—what candidates say is more a reflection of what constituencies demand than what candidates believe."

Paul from Beverly Hills, CA

"Stated some time ago, "...your perspective with respect to the meaning of the holiday season seems somewhat radical, if not archaic. What could be more wondrous and enjoyable but to share the moments of gift giving and good food with your family and friends. Even the arduous task of decorating a tree can be enjoyable and festive and thought-provoking if allowed. Wouldn't you agree?"

[No. What makes sense to me is giving as a reflection of one's personal feelings at a time when one is aware of those personal feelings. Giving at Christmas or at birthdays seems dehumanizing to me in that it puts "dates" and rituals ahead of the personal feelings. The dates create the expectation for the activities, rather than the activities occurring in response to feelings we have at a specific moment. Parents are teaching a specific lesson when they say Christmas is a time of giving. The feelings of the individual become subservient to the expectations of the arbitrary event. GFB]

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