

RELATIVELY SPEAKING

The Philosophy of Individualism

Number 33

Editor: Gordon F. Brown, PhD

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GREETINGS! For me it has been a time of slow, albeit significant, progress. Foremost, I believe I have made progress on rewriting the sex chapter of my book. I believe I now have an organization that will work—one that will provide a bird’s eye view of a relative perspective on what is generally referred to as sexual behavior. My energy levels are returning to normal. I completed the agonizing task of reviewing 35-years of teaching materials for either storage or disposal. In this newsletter, I have continued the “Christianity and Relativity” series by providing a perspective on the Christmas holidays. Also, I have made a modest beginning to the “Health Watch” series initiated in the previous newsletter. Work with me here. As it is with topics that are socially shunned, establishing the initial vocabulary meanings within a working context will take some time. Next, there is the “Talk Back” section. I really enjoy your comments and reproduce them with only minor editing for length or personal-type comments where I would feel more comfortable having the writer’s specific approval before repeating them. As it is, the “Talk Back” section provides a dimension to the newsletters attained in no other way. It is as if we are sharing ideas in a large discussion group with me as moderator and facilitator.

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A QUIZ—Just For Fun

Here are three quotes. See if we agree on which is consistent with an absolute, relative, or mixed perspective.

“In Germany’s election campaign, Gerhard Schroeder...unburdened by convictions of his own, he could be everything to everybody.”

Wall Street Journal, December 4, 1998

“But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God.” Bible—Job 13:3

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CHRISTIANITY and RELATIVITY

Article #4—What about Christmas?

As I look back over the first few articles in this series on religion and relativity, one pivotal point stands out as distinguishing the relative perspective from the absolute perspective. Only the relative approach is based upon the assumption of a personal relationship with a Force. Books such as the *Bible*, and people such as the local minister or prophets of the past can be used as resources to enhance that personal relationship but would never take precedence over or even become peer to that one-on-one relationship.

Also, as I see it, the *Bible* provides a unique message when compared with other resource materials relating to religion. When taken as a whole, the *Bible* can be seen to fundamentally support a relative perspective and to reject specifically both the absolute and mixed perspectives.

So what?

As we approach the holidays we can consider this time of the year from each of three “Christian” perspectives: absolute, relative, and mixed.

The absolutists can focus on Jesus’ birthday. Reality is physical—“I can look right out of my eyes and see it out there.” Anyone who disagrees with this fundamental Truth is Wrong and perhaps crazy. Beginning with this Reality-as-physical assumption, the physical Jesus represents Truth and Reality in physical form. Thus, the birth of Jesus is an important occasion in that it marks the beginning point when Truth came to earth in physical form. This beginning point can be celebrated in much the same way as the birth of the United States is celebrated on July 4th; however, rather than fireworks, we can have a manger scene with baby Jesus and Mary. Add Joseph, and you have the absolutely valued family setting.

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What About Christmas? (continued from page 1)

The mixed are given an excuse for having fun. Flashing colored lights, trees decorated with tinsel and plastic snow, the sound of carols emanating from churches and department stores alike, an abundance of food and attractively wrapped gifts—all of this combines to create a glorious and joyous holiday season! Only a Scrooge or Grinch would fail to join in. The winter holidays are for everyone. Have your baby Jesus doll, your Hanukkah bush, or your Santa Claus—it makes no difference. Now is the time to come together for having fun and feeling good.

Now come the relativists. Christmas, as a religious holiday, is important only to the degree it facilitates that personal one-on-one relationship with God. The Biblical message of Jesus, relatively speaking, was and is that an individual can have a personal one-on-one relationship with God. The focus is on Jesus' message rather than upon the assumed personal or physical characteristics of Jesus. Said another way, Jesus was the "light" of the world—a light that shows the way (*Bible*, John 12:46). The "light" is there to serve you and not to be served by you. Jesus, reportedly, stated it more harshly saying that if you worship him, rather than being served by him, "you have no part in me" (*Bible*, John 13:8).

Relatively speaking, Christmas time, with all of its socially-oriented demand characteristics, may be the toughest of times to keep a focus on Jesus' message of a 365-days-per-year personal and private relationship. While the mixed message on the importance of joy is seductive, and the absolute message on the importance of family is comforting, both would seem unrelated to enhancing a one-on-one relationship with that Force. Ironically, for some people, the Christmas season is an ideal time

to turn one's thoughts to that Force. As it happens, expression is no matter how large the family gathering, or how loud and ubiquitous the Christmas music, or how numerous the number of gifts or hugs, there can be a sense of loneliness for some people that is unique to the Christmas season. One way to describe this sense of loneliness is to begin by observing that very little of the Christmas festivities represent the personal choices of the individuals involved. Everything is scripted—the time of the year, the type of music, and the expectations for exchanging gifts. Individual choice and suppressed more than at any other time of the year. Even children are instructed "better not shout, better not cry...for Santa Claus is coming to town." As individuals, we are insignificant. There is an exception. For those who are "alone" this season, the season is theirs. For some people, there may be no sense of loneliness. As one person put it, "I never feel less alone than when alone." For others, there is a sense of loneliness. But, they too can say that their feelings of loneliness are real and that those *feelings* belong to them. And, whether comfortable or uncomfortable, the *season* belongs to communication; this, in turn, is the basis for establishing relationships; and, finally, our chosen relationships make up the substance of our personal identity. Each of us can be defined in terms of our choice of relationships. Consider that the beginning point and continuing them rather than the other way around. As for Jesus, his birth was not important; however, for some people, his message continues to be of fundamental importance. For it is, that for everyday of the year, an individual can have a one-on-one relationship with God. And, thus, it follows that to have such a relationship, an individual would never be alone—even to the point of saying "I am never less alone than when alone."

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HEALTH WATCH. Life and Death: Semantics

When a mother gives the gift of birth, she also gives the gift of death. Thus, life-death can be seen to form a single concept, similarly to male-female, day-night, or ying-yang. Relatively speaking, death contributes a special significance to life. Our choices make a difference! If a person were to live forever, it could be argued that the decisions made by an individual would lack significance—the things undone could always be performed in the future. Death provides the essential condition that makes our choices significant. What each of us chooses to do from moment to moment is significant in establishing our own individual identity, simply because our physical life has an end. Next time, I plan on addressing the matter of "physical" life.

TALK BACK

From Warren in Solvang, CA

Number 32 of 'Relatively Speaking' is at the top of my list. It was concise, clear, cogent. Keep the issues coming. I do get fired up, while I read through each issue. Also, I liked the paragraph on Health Watch. To say the least, your approach to living is refreshing.

Lovberta from Memphis, TN

Here I am. It is interesting that this phrase struck me at a time when it seems more than appropriate to reiterate the phrase right back to you. I would like to stay on the mailing list...You are right, 'a philosophy that does not adequately accommodate death does not adequately address life.' I am alive. How then, do I go peacefully into the hereafter? How then do I wait as my loved ones go gracefully into the abyss? Why then, is there no fear while others dread the days that creep silently into tomorrow as tomorrow weaves its way into forever? I am more than interested in reading Health Watch. Keep up the good work and thanks.

From Orin in Pasadena, CA

I was deep in the dumps when I first heard about your medical condition. Then I started thinking about all the people you have helped by showing them how to solve problems. I am sure you want time to do much more and I hope you are granted many years. I turned 60 this year but it had almost no negative impact. I think mostly due to your class and these letters. Yes, continue to send them as long as you feel good about them.

From Mary in Watertown, MA

My dear Bill died in January, and for that reason, you have received no message...I have very much enjoyed your Relatively Speaking newsletters...Bill would have deeply enjoyed your [last] newsletter. I regret that he wasn't able to do much reading in late '97. However, I do want to respond to you and to let you know it was, as they say, a 'very good read'—your 'Relatively Speaking.' I hope you continue the work.

From George in Paradise, CA

Received your latest Article. Great. The inclusion of Health Watch fits in nicely with our condition [spouse and me]...I am scheduled to get a bone biopsy to see...Forgetting all that, I am interested in how the Absolutes prepare for demise compared to the Relatives. As for myself, I look to the occupancy as a new adventure but one I will not anticipate by changing my life style. I plan to stay in motion (definition of life?) as long as possible. I think Abraham was a Relative...After I have absorbed your C&A 'What to ask for' I will take the liberty of commenting. On first draft, it appears to be as thought provoking as all your previous. I enjoy your contribution to my life....We send our love and best wishes.

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Talk Back--continued

From Casey in Felton, CA

Please continue to send me your newsletter. I save and keep all of them in a file so I can re-read them. I always find some 'Food for Thought' when reading them or perhaps I learn something new...I think it is important that you have the courage to write about Death and Dying in such a personal way. The World of Education has been a better place to visit because of you and [your spouse] Claudia. You are both in my heart.

From Paul in Arcadia, CA

Thank you for reminding me about the bi-annual address/interest update. While I am interested in remaining on the mailing list, I wonder if you have thought about sending the newsletters via electronic mail?...It might be interesting to do a survey to gage how the audience think about receiving your newsletter via e-mail.. I find myself on the road often these days. I'd be delighted to receive and read your newsletter while I am seven thousand miles away from home. If the audience prefers the "electronic" version of your newsletter, and when and if you decide to distribute the newsletter via e-mail, please let me know. I'd be more than glad to provide any assistance needed. On a more serious note, the 'four-year survival rate'...Modern technology is constantly making statistics out of date the same way it does to computer equipment. Regardless of statistics, I wish you well. Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us.

A QUIZ—Just For Fun (continued from page 1)

Here is the third quote, attributed to former U.S. President, Jimmy Carter.

“You can’t divorce religious belief and public service...and I’ve never detected any conflict between God’s will and my political duty. If you violate one, you violate the other.” (And I Quote by Applewhite, p. 111)

Have you taken a position on each statement? Here is how I see it. Schroeder would be consistent with the mixed, Job with the relative, and Carter with the absolute.

Address Update

Call anytime to leave a message (626-445-1749). If you have *96 (or *95, and it slipped by) consider making a decision whether or not to continue receiving the newsletters. As the existentialists argue, no decision is a decision. There is no absolute reason for choosing to continue receiving the newsletters. On the other hand, our very identity can be seen as a function of the ideas to which we choose to expose ourselves. If you choose, you can also e-mail a message to me at: relspeak@pacbell.net