

# ***RELATIVELY SPEAKING***

*The Philosophy of Individualism*

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**In this month's issue****THE ABSOLUTE-RELATIVE  
DISTINCTION APPLIED TO THEOLOGY**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>An Absolute View</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>A Relative View</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ABSOLUTE-RELATIVE CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>ADMINISTRATIVE NOTES</b>	<b>5</b>

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## ***ABSOLUTE-RELATIVE DISTINCTION APPLIED TO THEOLOGY***

***Gordon Brown and Jim Lunsford***

This article considers the application of the Absolute-Relative distinction as a tool to clarify issues in the area of theology.

**INTRODUCTION**

A recent Gallup Poll indicated that 94% of all Americans expressed a belief "...in God or a universal spirit..."; and 86% said that religion was either "very important," or "fairly important" (56% and 30%, respectively).

I would surmise from the data that less than 40% of all Americans attend church regularly; and so, it may be that more than half of all Americans believe in a "God," but are not "church goers."

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**ABSOLUTE VIEW OF THEOLOGY**

Assuming a belief in a knowable Truth, existing independent of the individual perceiver, the first task is to establish the Truth. Traditional ways of establishing Truth may include: (a) by an assumed "contract" with "God," such as the Ten

**ON THEOLOGY: ABSOLUTE VIEW  
(Continued)**

Commandments, or as discussed in Jewish writings (*Talmud* B. 59 b top); (b) an assumed revelation to an individual or group, such as the sages, prophets, ministers, etc., or the group of Cardinals selecting the Pope, to name several; (c) assumed sacred writings such as the *Bible*, *Torah*, *Koran*, etc.; and (d) a combination of the above.

Once the Truth is established. the religion becomes "established by identifying the "believers," and the "non-believers." The mission of the religion, is the "missionary program"—"saving" the "non-believers," by persuading them to become believers. Instead of "saving," terms like "caring," or " helping" may be used.

De-valuation of the "individual" is fundamental since the Truth is external, existing independent of the individual; or said another way, not of the individual's making. Rather than "self-determination," the individual should model himself after the Truth. In the *Bible* (RSV), consider some of Paul's admonitions: "Do nothing from selfishness...count others better than yourself" (*Philippians* 2:3).

Concomitant with the de-valuation of the individual, is the valuation given "groups," or more specifically, persons assumed to represent groups. The argument goes this way: One knowable Truth; one right way to think; and one right way to behave. If everyone were to submit themselves to the Truth, everyone could live in peace and harmony. Problems are created by people who act "differently" from the Truth; who act as "individuals"—and, such people prevent peace and harmony for everyone. Let's all be one happy group; let's be team players; let's be one happy family; let no one rock the boat.

Also, the knowable Truth could be disseminated most efficiently and equitably by ONE CENTRAL AGENCY.

Again, consider some admonitions attributed to Paul: "...always obey.... Do all things without...questioning... (*Philippians*, 2:12-14)"; "...be submissive to rulers and authorities..." (*Titus*, 3:1); "And above all...put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (*Colossians* 3:14); "Live in harmony with one another..." (*Romans*, 12: 16); and, "I appeal to you...that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (*Corinthians*, 1:10).

In summary, the Truth is established by some method (revelation, book, etc.); a group of "believers" is formed; THE mission is to persuade non-believers to accept the Truth, and so be "saved" from evil or the effects of non-Truth; since there can

***ON THEOLOGY: ABSOLUTE VIEW***  
**(Continued)**

only be one Absolute Truth, and such Truth is all inclusive, and applicable to all men, it follows that if everyone would think and act in harmony with the Truth, they would then be acting in harmony with each other; and, for a person to think or act significantly "different" than the group of believers, that is to think or act as an "individual," is to imply that either the group is "wrong," or that you are "wrong"—and that you have set yourself up as a judge of Truth. Logically, the group has an obligation to restrain the "individual."

Consistent with the Absolute View of Theology: Expanding considerable support into the training of the young in the ways of the Truth; and valuation of the young as the time when the significant human learning takes place. Centralized administration for the establishment and efficient dissemination of the Truth, such as the World Council of Churches,. Since Truth is all encompassing, no separation between Church and State, and so religious leaders publicly arguing and lobbying in the name of God or Truth for public laws that would require all Americans to abide by the Truth as professed by the religious Leaders, such as on abortion or the elimination by law of materials of questionable value. The State should function within the Truth. Concepts of "Good," and "Bad," for example, reflecting a judgment of consistency or inconsistency with the Truth; and concepts of "Hell," which generally assume that the individual had knowledge of the Truth and rejects it.

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**RELATIVE VIEW OF THEOLOGY**

It is unintelligible to talk of any "Reality" outside personal experience—a person can't "jump out of his skin," to see what it would like. Consequently, a person can't know external Truth or God, for example, as they exist independent of the person.

Though I can't claim to know you, I can know what I experience when I am with you. This idea is akin to Physicist Albert Einstein's position on relativity (Barnett, 1950), where he argues that science, "while telling nothing of the true 'nature' of things, it nevertheless succeeds in defining their relationships..." (p. 125-126; Barnett, 1948, p. 27). in the same reference, the philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead argued that you can never know the "principals" or participants, but the meeting is real; "The event is the unit of things real" (Barnett, 1948, p. 126; Barnett, 1950, p. 27).

***ON THEOLOGY: RELATIVE VIEW***  
**(Continued)**

More examples: If I eat some Fosselman's French Vanilla Ice Cream, I can't tell you what the ice-cream is like; but only what I am like when eating it. It is as if I were a piano; after each musician were to come into contact with me, I could tell you the music that resulted; the music would describe while in contact with the musician rather than the characteristics rather than the characteristics of the "musician" as he exists independent of me. Another example: I could tell you what I am when I am with you; I could say, "I love you, not so much for what you are, but for what I am when I am with you." And, again, if you were to "tickle" me, the "tickling" that I experienced would describe me while in contact with you rather than the characteristics of you existing independent of me.

Theologically, the emphasis is on a relationship, rather than being "good." "Praying" would imply a relationship; and "seeking God," would seem to imply a relationship. Attributed to Jesus was the argument that he was not "God" (*Matthew 19:17; Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19*). A relationship is always unique and private; the relationship is the experience of the individual; this is always unique and private to the individual. Such is the description of the relationship between God and man in the *New Testament* (RSV): "...when you pray, go into your room and shut the door..." (*Matthew 5:6*); "God who is in secret (Unknowable), sees in secret, rewards in secret" (*Matthew,6:24*).

What an individual chooses gives rise to his "world" of experience; and his world of conscious experience is "him." Though his choices are neither "good" nor "bad," his present and future experiences (his world), will be different; depending on his choices. Some relative theologians argue that some choices result in a reasonable possibility of eternal life—which is neither "good" nor "bad," it simply IS.

REFERENCES

Barnett, L. (1948). *The universe and Dr. Einstein*. New York: William Sloane Associates.

Barnett, L. (1950). *The universe and Dr. Einstein (rev. ed)*. New York: Mentor Books (The New American Library of World Literature).

[Note: Editions published after 1950 by Bantam Books (1968 and later) have been edited to substantially alter the meaning of several passages originally "approved" by Einstein in the 1948 edition. The 1950 edition appears to be consistent with the 1948 publication,]

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## **ABSOLUTE vs. RELATIVE THEOLOGY**

1. **ABS:** Group emphasis: How many saved—the more the better; The Trust can be given to 1000 people as easily as 10.

vs.

**REL:** Individual emphasis: Since the focus is on a relationship, it is always private, personal, and individual.

2. **ABS:** God is knowable: So, you can worship Him; follow Him; do His will; etc.

vs.

**REL:** God is unknowable: You choose a relationship with Him because of what you are when with Him; God is not chosen because of what He is (as alleged by the Absolutists—"Goodness," "Truth," and so on), but for what the individual is or (becomes) as a result.

3. **ABS:** Emphasis on the future: Heaven, eternal life, etc.; as a reward for subjecting yourself to His Truth.

vs.

**REL:** Emphasis on the present: The relationship is "now"; and it is within you; all things become different now and you choose them now; possibility of eternal life or any experience in the future is rationally speculative and of secondary significance to the present.

**ADDED NOTE:** This application of the Absolute/Relative distinction to Theology is meant to be a "bird's eye view" not a fine focus. But, this writer believes that this "bird's eye view" would be substantially verified under a "fine focus."

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## ***ADMINISTRATIVE NOTES***

Newsletter Name Change: Rather than "Relatively Speaking, some early newsletters were renamed "Absolute/Relative Distinction" to emphasize that the primary purpose of these newsletters is to clarify the two alternatives, rather than advocating one over the other.

***Administrative Notes (Continued)***

Meetings are planned at Pasadena City College (PCC) 12:00 noon to 1:00 pm in the "C" Building, Room 400; beginning September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1976 and continuing for the next 3 to 4 months. Any questions, call Jim Bickley. These meetings are designed primarily for students and faculty at PCC.

Planning to set up a series of weekly or bi-weekly meetings at John Caldecott's home (about a block from PCC). The time and day will be arranged to accommodate those interested and who call John or his wife Peggy.

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