

# DEALING WITH RELIGIOUS RELATIVISM IN THE CLASSROOM

David H. Nikkel

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In every class I have taught in religious studies, a significant proportion of student essays have evidenced a decided relativism with respect to religion. Even students who have strongly argued a position, such as the untenability of a fundamentalist approach to Scripture, often conclude with a seemingly obligatory disclaimer, such as, "but that's just my opinion; it all depends on what you believe." These disclaimers are also common among students of an evangelical or conservative Christian orientation, despite the apparent contradiction to the exclusivist claims of their heritage. While not denying additional factors in such disclaimers, I regard these as clear manifestations of the religious relativism that is endemic to contemporary North American culture. (Certainly in many other academic areas, especially the natural sciences, one does not encounter such relativistic conclusions. A student finishing an argument in chemistry or physics with, "but that's my opinion; every theory is equally valid," is a ludicrous notion.)

In most of my courses, therefore, I have judged it important to help students become aware of this endemic relativism expressed in their own thinking and of an alternative--of the possibility of a *tertium quid* between or beyond absolutism and relativism. (The perspective that guides my approach is that neither absolutism nor relativism is tenable.)

In this essay I will discuss issues and questions I present to the students, as well as some of the methods I employ.

I am not alone among scholars of religion and of other disciplines in the opinion that to get a good grip on modern relativism one must understand the modern absolutism that preceded it (see Diagram I). To develop the notion of a controlling picture or assumption of modernity, I have passed around certain Renaissance paintings at the beginning of the class session. (Examples include Bento Angelico's *The Adoration of the Magi* and Pierodi Cosimo's *The Visitation with Saint Nicholas and Saint Anthony Abbot*.)

I ask the class to observe the paintings and note anything striking, noteworthy, or unusual about them. The answer I am looking for--which a student usually volunteers--is that everything in the paintings is crystal clear, including great detail in the paintings' backgrounds. I query whether this is congruent with the way the human eye functions. I demonstrate by putting my hand in front of my face, noting that when I focus on a particular student in the back of the room, my hand is blurry, while conversely if I focus on my hand the student is too fuzzy to identify. I introduce the idea of a controlling picture that governs how a culture looks at the world and ask what picture or assumption the crystal clear paintings might reveal. Usually a class member suggests that the assumption implicit in these paintings is that human beings can see or know everything (clearly). I indicate that the basic assumption of modernity is that we can leave behind the limitations of our bodies, language, history, and culture and see everything with crystal

clarity. Thus modernity exacerbates a human tendency to want "to know it all." I might refer to a plaque at one time hanging in my kitchen: "Those who think they know everything are very annoying to those of us who do."

The stage is now set for discussing the genesis of modern relativism. Modernity's controlling picture engendered an initial confidence that human reason would establish universally accepted religious truths. Historically this hope certainly was not fulfilled. Modernity's model of knowledge demanded explicitness and objective proof. (The model encouraged the growth of science, while science's success reinforced and amplified the model). Given the dominance of modernity's controlling picture, it was inevitable that many would come to regard religion relativistically, for religion is a realm quite unamenable to fully explicable, objective, and scientific proof.

The growth of religious relativism has been synchronic with a growth in religious tolerance. Significant numbers of my students speak or write as if relativism and tolerance are equivalent or at least mutually implicative. I draw a clear distinction between the two. Tolerance upholds the right to freedom of religious belief and practice, and may even respect and appreciate religions other than one's own. However, tolerance need not entail the belief that all religions and all religious claims and practices are *equally* true or valid. Thus all religious relativists may be tolerant, but not all religiously tolerant persons are relativists!

Respect and appreciation for religions other than one's own are increasingly seen as a virtue (along with appreciation for multiculturalism and "otherness" generally). Students often assume that the relativist position is the one most respectful of otherness, because *all* (sincere) religious convictions are regarded as equally valid. I challenge my students, drawing as needed on a progression of educative (leading?!) questions, such as:

1. Does relativism [truly] respect religious viewpoints different from one's own?
2. How would a relativist react to a religious belief very different from his or her own?
3. Would a relativist be challenged by a different belief from his or her own?

Students and/or I thus present the perspective that true relativism entails casualness and indifference toward different beliefs, for nothing can challenge or threaten our own beliefs which are, after all, simply a matter of private taste or opinion. Thus relativism does not lead one to seriously engage differing religious orientations.

In a related vein, students have revealed in writing and discussion an accompanying privatistic model of religious belief formation--particularly on the issue of interpretation of Scripture. One forms an interpretation in one's own room, through solitary reading and thinking--and all interpretations are equally valid. I suggest the possibility of dialogue and learning from one another in the process of scriptural interpretation and other religious belief formation. This dialogue and learning may involve encounter with interpretations from various periods of Christian history.

I attempt a direct challenge to relativism by drawing out students' experience that suggest that people do not and perhaps cannot consistently uphold religious relativism. I ask if students'

religious beliefs have changed since they were young children (and perhaps if they expect they will further change over the rest of their lives). I further query whether change in religious thinking and practice is compatible with, or adequately accounted for by, relativism. For if everything religious is only a matter of opinion, each equally valid for each individual, why would anyone go through the disorientation and effort of changing any religious conviction? I or a student will make the point that people normally change convictions based on an underlying conviction that in doing so they are getting closer to some truth or value.

Sometimes I have described absolutism and relativism, then divided the class into small groups of 6-8 to discuss the question of whether there is a third option between or beyond absolutism and relativism and to evaluate the options. I have had only limited success with this approach: most of the small groups did not succeed in articulating an alternative and generally favored relativism as the best option.

I have therefore modified my approach. I have written "absolutism" on one side of a chalkboard and "relativism" on the other side. I ask the students to share words and phrases describing absolutism, then relativism. Because we have already talked about these two, the students are generally able to articulate appropriate characterizations of each, which I supplement as needed. Next I write "Middle Way" on the board and ask what an alternative to both absolutism and relativism, between or beyond the two, might look like. (I may break them into small groups at this point.) I end up contributing many of the descriptions for this, but the class is able to make significant contributions. Diagram II gives an example of the chalkboard at the end of this exercise.

Diagram I  
A Timeline of Modernity

1300's	1500's	1600's	1700's	1800's
Renaissance Art	Protestant Reformation 1521 Luther at Worms	Enlightenment Deism		Relativism Subjectivism

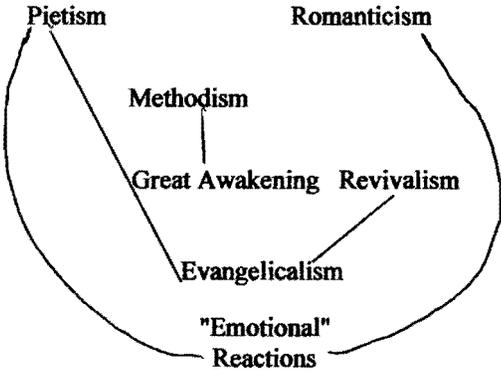


Diagram II

Modern Absolutism

Certainty  
 One right way  
 Clarity  
 Nothing Hidden  
 Objective  
 Neutral  
 Impersonal  
 Proof  
 Scientific  
 Mathematical  
 Logical

Middle Way

Convincing Evidence  
 Various right ways  
 Complex  
 Ambiguous—Dialectical--  
 "Both/and"  
 Probabilistic  
 Contextual  
 Interconnected  
 Embodied  
 Mediated  
 Intuitive  
 Imaginative  
 Metaphorical

Modern Relativism

(Just) Opinion  
 (Just) Interpretation  
 Taste  
 Subjectivism  
 Privatism  
 No right or wrong  
 No proof (=No knowledge)  
 Nihilism

Often accompanying relativism is the notion that different religious outlooks are incommensurate in their most basic beliefs. Part of the logic behind this position is that, since religious beliefs are strictly relative to specific groups and/or individuals, there is no legitimacy in comparing and contrasting such basic orientations. Each religion is pictured as a self-enclosed system. Diagram III suggests how incommensurability regards the relationships of sample religions and worldviews.

Opposed to incommensurability is the claim that different world views have some commonalities, even in their basic assumptions or commitments. As I offer examples of such commonalities, I draw an alternative model of the relationships between sample religious and other world views, also found in Diagram III. These examples may include the following: The three major Western monotheisms, of course, share a belief in a personal God as the ultimate reality. Most other religions believe in an ultimate reality or "higher power" (to borrow from Alcoholics Anonymous) that is the source of, includes, and/or is the goal of all reality. Finally, a secular scientific worldview shares with most religions a belief that reality is (on the whole) orderly and knowable. Using the above diagrams has been especially helpful for students who have difficulty with abstract concepts and/or whose preferred learning style involves spatial imagery and relationships.

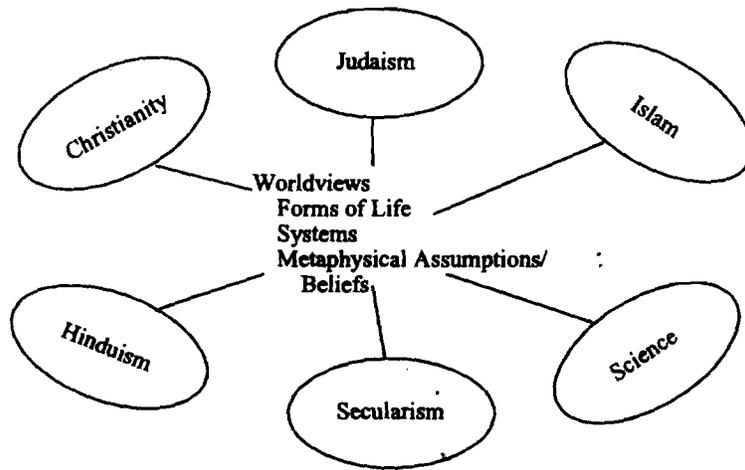
I have sometimes found the use of humor to be effective in helping students become aware of the difficulties (they have) with religious relativism. I normally have a designated time period for discussing opinion papers students write for many of my classes. In one class, I started a discussion with one student who had written an essay effectively developing arguments against Christian fundamentalism, then had concluded the essay with, "but it's all a matter of your opinion." I assumed the posture of an attorney "browbeating" a witness: "Admit it; you really think the fundamentalist are WRONG! Don't you?" "Yeah, I do!" he responded with obvious catharsis. An exercise such as this illustrates the truth that in practice people are not consistent relativists when it comes to religion or anything else important-nor do I think they can or should be. The *tertium quid* I struggle to articulate attempts to find a way between the timidity of the

seemingly obligatory disclaimer, "But it's just a matter of opinion," and the arrogance of absolutism. No one claim to religious truth is absolutely superior to other claims, yet not all claims are equally valid or truthful-indeed some are harmful or far from truth.

An attraction of relativism that helps explain its pervasiveness and persistence is that it absolves one of the risks of being wrong and of the responsibility to correct wrong convictions or orientations. Of course in its milder form, relativism entails that there *are* standards for truth *within*, relative to, particular groups and traditions. However, the relativism I encounter in classes is very individualistic and subjectivistic. I lead into this aspect of relativism by referring to the tag line of *Love Story*: "Love means never having to say you're sorry." I offer this parallel: "Relativism means never having to say you're wrong." I then might refer to the character, Arthur Fonzarelli, of the television series, *Happy Days*. "The Fonz" sometimes tried unsuccessfully to stutter out the words, "I was wrong." Admitting error is indeed a problem for many of us. Yet I believe we teachers in religious studies can effectively encourage (some of) our students to forsake an easy relativism to embark on a journey of discovery of truth (albeit imperfect and partial) about where we fit in the "larger scheme" or whole of things and about what ultimately matters.

Diagram III

Incommensurability



Commonalities

