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BRIEFING

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Moral Relativism

Schools and Societies

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CAUSES AND CURES

When Christians complain about the way things are going in society, no one is very interested. When Sir Ron Dearing and the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority express deep concerns about the way our civilisation is going, the media and public sit up and take notice. At a recent SCAA conference, Sir Ron said, "It requires only a little evil to hurt and change the whole quality of a civilisation, our civilisation." His diagnosis was simple - "The gradual erosion of the Christian religion, the decline of Sunday School as part of a child's Sunday, and the values they stood for, have further loosened the code our society is based upon."

Dr Nick Tate, SCAA chief executive, put this threat down to society to "the spread of all pervasive relativism" quoting Lord Rees-Mogg's view that "moral relativism is ... the spongiform creed of the British Establishment, of modern governments, of modern education, of modern broadcasting, of the whole moral consciousness of present-day Britain." Tate offered four reasons for the domination of our consciousness by moral relativism. (1) The desire to respect the views of others and to expiate past faults. He thinks that we have over-reacted to differences in values so much that we have weakened the very concept of value. (2) The decline of religious faith. The credibility of morality has been weakened by the loss of its religious basis. (3) Wider intellectual currents. He blames the full flowering of postmodernism with its simultaneous and dispiriting rejection of universal values. (4) Consumerist Pressures. The preoccupation with self-satisfaction and the infantilising of our images of human life resulting from consumerism help blur any difference between morality and taste. His conclusion is worth noting. "If ever a dragon needed slaying, it is the dragon of relativism."

The treatment for the disease of relativism according to Tate and Dearing should happen in schools. National agreement on universal values would mean society authorising and supporting schools that teach these accepted moral givens. Schools should create a total environment supporting such moral stances. Religious education should provide children with ways of understanding themselves and the world. The stress on self-esteem and moral relativism in much of personal and social education should be challenged. An education for citizenship should strengthen our sense of community. With these aims in mind, a new national forum will be set up to explore the problems and provide practical solutions to help schools improve what they are already trying to do.

MORAL RELATIVISM - WHAT IS IT?

The world is a global village. Popular travel and ease of communication has meant that we are able to see what is happening in the world at first hand. The presence of people of different lands and cultures on our own doorsteps has made us aware of different moral attitudes and different ways of looking at things. The presence of variety has made us ask some basic questions about what we believe to be right and wrong. What makes us so sure that our views of right and wrong are correct and that everyone else in the world is wrong? Even within our own society and community there are tremendous variations of beliefs on the morality of abortion, euthanasia, same-sex relationships, social justice, war and personal freedom. Trying to live with such variety can lead to moral relativism.

The current outlook is that what is right and wrong vary from time to time, place to place, and person to person. There are no universally valid, absolute moral standards. All morality is relative. Right and wrong depend on where you happen to be, the time in which you happen to exist, the setting and the situation. When in Rome we do what the Romans do. When we live somewhere else we behave in ways that fit in with that society.

In lectures, I try to illustrate the clash of cultures with a story about one of my early students in England. When he first met my wife, he greeted her with a kiss on the cheek. In my home town of Hawick, when a man kissed your wife, you hit him. But being a stranger I began to observe English customs and soon found that kissing other people's wives in social settings was perfectly acceptable. In Timbuktu when Granny gets frail and decrepit, some tribes kill her and eat her. This is to send her on to the next world still able to travel. In Taunton, when Granny gets frail we put her in an Nursing Home. Morality varies. Everything is relative.

The relativist is not stupid. He or she realises that in order to live together in society we have to have some rules. We couldn't

just allow everyone to do whatever is right in their own eyes. The way of coping therefore is to live and let live--to be tolerant. It is then no surprise that in our West-ern world the greatest virtue of all seems to be tolerance. Anyone who has strongly held views and tries to express them as absolutes runs into a barrage of criticism and disapproval. Tolerance is the name of the game.

The net result of embracing this outlook has been the kind of decline about which Nick Tate and Ron Dearing are so concerned. But it is not so much the symptoms that we have to address, it is the root philosophy that needs to be countered.

RESPONDING TO MORAL RELATIVISM

Relativism is fatally flawed. It rests on a fundamental contradiction. If someone says, 'Everything is relative', then he is making either an absolutely or a relatively true claim. If it is absolutely true, then it contradicts itself for we have then at least one absolutely true point which is relativism. If relativism is only relatively true then it is only true for some people at some times in some places. In that case, it does not need to be accepted by me or anyone else. The problem for the relativist is that he cannot state his view without a self-contradiction which undermines relativism itself. To be scrupulous, this argument only shows that relativism cannot be stated or believed to be true without destroying itself. It does not actually show that it is wrong. It might be true but we can never know or state that it is true.

In fact it isn't true. If we examine different cultures across the ages and look particularly at the different legal, moral and religious codes, then we find remarkable similarities between what they have to say. All of them offer some kinds of rules about the relationships between Parents and children. All have rules about sexual behaviour, truth telling, the value or sanctity of life and about what belongs or does not belong to different people or groups. There are two noteworthy points. Obviously different cultures may express these

same rules in different ways. Caring for the elderly in Timbuktu leads to different actions than in Taunton, but the principle at work is the same.

It is also important to recognise that these five fundamental values are expressed in those of the Ten Commandments which are to do with relations between human beings. It is a pointer to the fact that human society needs the order given in creation to operate at all. If we cannot have and care for children, rely on each other's word, be secure in our sexual being and behaviour, and feel safe from threat to our property and ourselves, then we will not be able to function as individuals or as a community. God's standards are basic to the good of humankind.

The philosopher Bernard Williams points to this fundamental agreement in a different way. He argues that when we come across people who sacrifice virgins or are cannibals, we don't just let them get on with it. We believe that these kinds of things are wrong and we try to persuade people to give up such practices. If people do have different moral views, they don't just settle for living with difference. Part of what it means to be human is to engage in moral debate and discussion. We offer each other moral reasons to try to justify our views and to show weaknesses in the views of others. The very existence of moral debate and the universal way that all of us recognise the need for justification of moral views, especially when they seem to run against the generally accepted view, shows that there is a common moral base according to Williams.

The way we conduct moral discussions and the content of moral principles clearly point to a common set of fundamental values which have a universal validity. These moral principles are expressed in different ways according to the culture in which we operate, but that does not remove their centrality. If we are in conflict within or between a society, then we can appeal to these fundamentals as a way of resolving disputes and disagreements.

The relativist cheats in the expression of moral relativism, but also in moving from a description that everything is morally relative to a prescription that we should therefore be tolerant. Such a move requires a new justification and falls into the trap of making one value absolute - that of tolerance - when such absolute values are absolutely denied.

In fact there are problems with trying to make tolerance an absolute at all. If we are totally and absolutely tolerant and meet someone who hates tolerant people so much that he kills them, then the tolerant person has a dilemma about how far to tolerate intolerance. Such are the genuine limits of tolerance, for we all believe that there are some things which are always wrong and should never be tolerated. Raping a woman, making someone a junkie and abusing children are clearly wrong and not to be tolerated.

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO RELATIVISM

Arguments against relativism do not need to be based on a Christian or biblical framework. It is important that Christians do not fail to use the good and sound critiques which we can find all around us against things and views which are wrong. However to use such arguments alone will never be enough for the Christian. When we meet the moral relativist, we want to do something more than complain about the results and consequences of relativism and the nonsense and falsity of it.

The good news is that there is an alternative to relativism. God has revealed His universal moral standards in the world in human nature, in His dealings with humankind, in the Ten Commandments, in the covenants He has made down through the ages, in His living Word, the Bible, and most of all in the person and teaching of Jesus. In all of these sources we have God's standards which are eternally and universally valid. They create a standard of life at two levels. They offer all human beings a basic framework for human

living in society. Without these rules we will not survive as individuals or as a community. But in Christ they also challenge humanity to be the very best it can be. Jesus not only reveals the reality of a perfect human life, but His life and death open the door to all of us to live like Him.

SO WHAT?

In the last fifty years many of the basic attitudes to moral issues have changed. What was regarded as wrong then is now not just tolerated, but accepted as good and right. Abortion, divorce, euthanasia, Sunday trading and the National Lottery are all examples where the public consensus has gone. While we must respond to each and every issue as it arises, it is even more important to spot the trends which underlie this drift. One major force is moral relativism. It needs to be named and dealt with before we lose even more ground and our very civilisation is threatened.

It is vital, then, that Christians are engaged in the debate about right and wrong. Whether in discussions about morality and religious education in the National Curriculum or in responding to the moral issues of the day in our work, home and community settings, Christians need to be involved. In newspapers, radio and television, the Christian voice needs to be raised. We should be doing four things.

- Showing the destructive consequences of the drift towards moral relativism.
- Showing the inherent illogicality and flawed nature of moral relativism.
- Supporting and building that basic framework of moral values which God has given for all human beings.
- Proclaiming and living out the highest ethical ideals as imitators and living incarnations of Jesus.

The good news is that we don't have to do all of these things on our own. God has given us the gift and grace of His Holy Spirit. He is the One who leads us into all truth and empowers us to show the fruit of the Spirit.

Further Reading:

David Cook, *Dilemmas of Life* (IVP 1990)

AF Holmes, *All Truth is God' Truth* (IVP 1977)

E A Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity* (Greenwood Press, 1970)

Bernard Williams, *Morality* (CUP, 1993)

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