

Truth, Relativism & Tolerance

By Ron J. Lint

You can't judge them. Who are you to say what's right or wrong? Who are you to judge me? Who made you God? You may say that abortion is wrong, but a lot of other people say it's right. Besides, it's legal. What makes your view anymore righteous than theirs? That's what they do in that culture. Who are you to say they're wrong? You Christians are all the same: you seem to really enjoy judging others and telling everyone what to do. To say that Jesus is the only way to God is narrow and judgmental. Everyone has his own beliefs. Who's to say who is right and who is wrong? All roads lead to God.

And so the dialogue goes in our post-modern culture where there is no transcendent truth; where all questions of morality are to be decided by the individual; where any claim to truth or absolute values is deemed bigoted, narrow-minded, opinionated, dogmatic, and ignorant, not to speak of being iconoclastic. Truth is defined by the individual, and is not to be questioned. After all, what's true for you is not necessarily true for me. Anyone who claims the existence of transcendent truth is a right-wing bigot. Moral relativism is man's gift to humanity. It allows the free expression of one's basest desires, all without judgment, condemnation, or justification.

But what about tolerance? Surely that's a good thing. We should be tolerant of the beliefs and actions of others, right? With the exception of our post-modern culture, tolerance has always meant to be patient with others who disagreed; to allow dissent without persecution; to forbear in the face of disagreement. But in today's society, tolerance means to place all dissenting positions on level with one's own position – all opinions are true, none is wrong – credulity is the goal. Tolerance was always an acknowledgment of the right to disagree. Until today's modern culture, it was never an attempt to destroy absolutes, or to denigrate truth to the level of individual preference. So, here we are, enlightened to our new perspectives: there is NO truth

(except, of course, this truth); all is relative (except, of course, torturing babies for fun); and we must all practice tolerance (except, of course, if you are hurting me or my family).

“Truth is in the eye of the beholder” and “tolerance,” as currently defined, can be conflated into the broader, encompassing topic of Moral Relativism. There appears to be three distinct types of moral relativism: Society Does Relativism, Society Says Relativism, and I Say Relativism. “Society Does Relativism” is anthropological, in that it simply observes what differing societies do. It makes no judgments as to right or wrong, good or evil, helpful or destructive. Whereas we used to think that morality was objective – even absolute and beyond serious question – now we can see that morality differs across cultural boundaries. Our post-modern conclusion is that since we can conclusively see that morality does indeed differ from culture to culture, it must follow that morality is solely a function of culture. Consequently, one cannot say that the moral values of culture A are any more imbued with “righteousness” than those of culture B. Moreover, who can say what is righteous?

Even in full recognition of the differences among cultures, I am not convinced that those differences are profound, or even contradictory at their core. For example, Western Society does not believe in eating human beings, but we do eat beef. The Hindus, on the other hand, will not eat beef because it might be a reincarnated human. Clearly, neither culture believes in eating human flesh. It seems to me that many of the observed cultural differences have, at their core, normative and prescriptive elements that are similar upon investigation. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine a culture that prescribes the torture of babies, or the breaking of one’s contracts, or stealing the property of another. Yes, there are cultural differences, and some of those differences are moral in nature, but it simply does not follow that the existence of differing moral values means that there are no objectively correct moral values. Disagreement does not mean the absence of truth. Similarly, the existence of variant choices does not mean the absence of truth.

Whereas “Society Does Relativism” attempts to make no moral judgments, concluding that morality differs from culture to culture, making it culturally conceived, “Society Says Relativism” makes the trenchant claim that one should do as society says one should do. This type of relativism is clearly conventionalism. Society determines what is right or wrong, and all should abide by its conventions. Otherwise, anarchy will result.

A good example of this is the moral issue of abortion. One who is pro-life might argue that abortion is murder and therefore clearly immoral. Another might say, “You just don’t get it do you? Abortion is legal in this country.” The underlying message to this rebuttal is that anything that is legal is also moral. Legality makes morality; legality determines morality. It never occurs to the person making this rebuttal that legality and morality are not synonymous terms, and that legality in no way makes morality.

It was this exact defense – legality makes morality – that was used by the Nazis at the Nuremburg Trials. They claimed that they were doing their legal and moral duty to follow the orders of their superiors as well as the moral dictates of their culture – it was culturally correct and acceptable to persecute Jews. They were doing what society said to do. By what right does another culture pass judgment on Nazi Germany? The judges at the Nuremburg Trials, representing the value system of the Western world, did not buy that argument, stating that some things are evil, some things are wrong, and that transcendent moral values do exist.

Clearly, the problem with the “Society Says” argument is that the existence of differing views and moral values in no logical way leads to the conclusion that truth does not exist. By way of another example, take the beliefs of the majority of the pre-Columbus world that the earth was flat and that the sun revolved around the earth. A few scientists and observers, Columbus among them, thought differently. Differing views do not obviate objective reality. Either the earth is flat or it isn’t. Either the sun revolves around the earth or it doesn’t. It does not rationally follow that because there are differing views that no one is objectively correct.

This brings us to the most insidious and sinister form of moral relativism – “I Say Relativism,” also known as subjectivism. This form of relativism refers back to the introduction: Who are you to say what's right or wrong? Who are you to judge me? Who made you God? Everyone has his own beliefs. This type of moral relativism is deeply rooted in our post-modern culture. It is taught in our schools as incontrovertible dogma; it is the pillar upon which our society is built; it is the rule of business; it is the foundational creed of diversity training. It is how we think today. Truth is defined by the individual, and is not to be questioned. After all, what's true for you is not necessarily true for me. Anyone who claims the existence of transcendent truth is a right-wing bigot. As enticing as this form of relativism might be, it has several serious flaws.

Flaw #1: If morality is indeed relative, then the relativist has no standing to say that anything is wrong in all cases for all people. Again, take the example of torturing babies for fun. The “I Say” relativist cannot say that this practice is wrong, for right and wrong are matters of personal judgment.

Flaw #2: The “I Say” relativist cannot complain about evil, in that evil (by his own admission) is a matter of subjective determination – what is evil to you is not necessarily evil to me. Yet, even this type of relativist is repulsed by gratuitous acts of violence.

Flaw #3: The “I Say” relativist cannot place blame or accept praise. One might praise mother Theresa for all the good she did for the indigent and starving in India, but the “I Say” relativist can make no universal statement of right or wrong, good or evil. To praise Mother Theresa would be to make a moral judgment, and that would be inconsistent. Likewise, to condemn a perceived evil is equally inconsistent.

Flaw #4: The “I Say” relativist cannot claim fairness or unfairness, for to do so is to make a moral judgment. The extent to which an act is just or unjust is a matter of personal determination.

Flaw #5: The "I Say" relativist cannot improve his own morality, in that there is no standard of morality from which an improvement could be measured. Individuals can change their morality, but in no way can such a change be judged an improvement.

Flaw #6: The "I Say" relativist cannot have a meaningful moral discussion. If there is no such thing as universal good or evil, if all is relative to the individual, then all such polemics are meaningless.

Flaw #7: The "I Say" relativist cannot justify or promote tolerance. The relativist enjoys promoting tolerance as a virtue, but how can this attribute be a virtue when there is no objective moral truth?

Herein lies the problem. The relativist cannot allow himself to judge moral issues because he then finds himself face to face with a concept he cannot accept: higher Truth, or in fact, truth in any form. If one judges moral issues, then one must do so from a platform of transcending Truth; Truth which is greater than that of any one man or group of men. With this in mind, the relativist finds himself considering, ever so slightly, the possibility of God...and that is wholly unacceptable. The competing concepts of Relativism and a transcendent moral God are totally antithetic. A relativist cannot believe in God and be true to his philosophy of life.