

Paul a relativist?

In response to Joel Shempert's opinion piece, "Truth or Consequences: In Search of an Absolute", (Wednesday, October 28th, 1998, Issue 4) I would suggest that even Paul of Tarsus was a moral relativist masquerading as a moral absolutist in his day. Since I have discussed religion with Joel in Comparative Religion class and in many other discussions, he knows of my aversion to simply quoting Bible passages to prove universal truth. But, since his writing opens this door, let me ask if he thinks the following ideas of Paul of Tarsus are absolute or relative:

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

• "May condemnation fall on those that unsettle you." (Gal. 5:10) (Boy, if I wished that on anyone that unsettled me...) "Those that trouble you about circumcision should go the whole way and castrate themselves." (Gal. 5:12) (A reference to whether circumci-

sion was necessary)

• "It is shameful for a woman to speak in church." (1Cor. 14:34-35) Does Joel suggest that this is still true today... or was it ethically relevant at the time Paul started it?

• "Slaveowners, deal justly and fairly with your slaves" (Col. 4:1) Today, since we are not relativists in this regard as were the Roman civilizations of Paul's time we might say, "Slaveowners, free your slaves."

There are many other instances that suggest Paul was speaking a truth that was relative to his time and circumstance. I am not sug-

gesting that there is a moral absolute from which humans might contemplate or judge actions, I am only suggesting that Joel take care in declaring Absolute Truth's Parameters. They might be much bigger and more flexible to the evolving human consequences that a simple perusal of the boundaries of truth might indicate.

BILL BRIARE
Religion Instructor

Response to letters

JOEL P. SHERPERT
Copy Editor

Those who have responded to my column, "Truth and Consequences," seem between them to mistake me on two points. First, I am attributed by my critics a childish crude understanding of Paul's thought and writings. By claiming briefly (too briefly, I admit) that Paul spoke of an Absolute, I am expected to accept every word that fell from his lips as a concrete expression of that Absolute—a position that severely limits my philosophical options.

Rather, I would say that Paul in many cases *applied* absolute principles to culturally relative

situation. Thus, "It is shameful for women to speak in church" is relative to the culture, but the principles behind it—humility and modesty—are not.

I believe that Bryant-Trerise has mistaken brevity for simplicity. Themes touched on briefly in a 500-word article (and made as clear as possible for an intellectually diverse readership) are not quite on par with topics explored meticulously in Master's theses or scholarly journals. The reader must be asked to employ patience. Last week's column was by no means a final answer; it was a foundation for further thought. It was a foot in the door—a door some seem to wish stay closed.

Absolutism: realistic or simplistic?

In his column, "Truth & Consequences: In search of an Absolute" (October 28), Joel Shempert says, "Relativism is a sure killer of a culture. It is when the hedonism and moral decay of Rome finally caught

stopped; slavery has declined; Christianity has become the religion of most of those in the empire, including the emperor. In other words, Rome was at its most "immoral" when it was strongest as an empire.

Mr. Shempert's cause-effect connection between moral decay and the end of a civilization is simplistic at best.

This oversimplification of the morality-history connection has significant consequences. Once someone started believing his civilization knew how to interpret the Absolute Principle, it has been, historically, a very small step to deciding to enforce that interpretation, and then we inevitably get oppression, usually violent, of those who disagree.

It makes no difference to say that that violence is an incorrect interpretation of the Principle; the lesson that history teaches is that those who enforce a moral absolute usually do so using violence, whether physical or psychological. Mr. Shempert is welcome to believe in the need for an Absolute Principle, but when someone starts building a society based on a certain interpretation of that, it's not long before they also start building the crosses, thumbscrews, iron maidens, whips, nooses and showers. Yes, I'm saying that the "moral" cultures are the relativist ones.

Paul himself, in the "more excellent way" that he writes of, advocates a kind of moral relativism. Love, he says, "does not insist on its own way.... It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor. 13:5, 7 [NRSV]). This is a radical humility. It says, "I don't know what's right—except to love." This is not a morality that can be enforced, of course, because doing so would violate the very standard that was being enforced. And if you cannot enforce a morality, then a kind of moral relativism, at least in the political sphere

of things, is a necessity. It's true that Mr. Shempert's primary concern is not the political "sphere of things" but the philosophical; nonetheless he tries to make equations to the political. He is implying that if we as a culture continue with relativism, we're doomed. History teaches just the opposite; those who would enforce the absolute would doom the culture, just as those who would enforce love would doom love.

Let me repeat: an Absolute Principle may in fact be ultimately necessary. But so what? What use is that statement when "we know only in part" and no one would say "the complete" has yet come? The "more excellent way" is, in fact, not to insist on my own way, especially my own interpretation of absolute principles, about which I "see in a mirror, dimly." As Kierkegaard realized, we must have uncertainty for faith to exist.

Finally, here's an instance of a kind of relativism strengthening a civilization. In Islamic Spain, Jews and Christians had to pay higher taxes and were forbidden from holding government posts and from proselytizing, but beyond that they were left alone to worship and study as they pleased. The Muslims did not insist on their own way, and consequently all groups were able to contribute to the civilization. The result was a staggeringly beautiful architecture and calligraphy, the rescue for much of Europe of classical philosophy, the addition to that of much original medieval thought and literature...in other words, a rich civilization that lasted 600 years until the Islamic leaders started sniping among themselves and the Christian nobles were able to take advantage of the times and kick them out. And then the Christians kicked out the Jews as well and started the Inquisition. They were quite certain of their absolute principles.

JAMES BRYANT-TRERISE
English Instructor

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James Bryant-
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English Instructor

THE CLACKAMAS PRINT

Editor in Chief:

Robert Schoenberg (x2576)

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