

CLAIMS OF TRUTH IN AN AGE OF RELATIVISM

by Fr Justin Ford

‘I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice.’ (*Jn* 18:37) These words of Jesus to Pontius Pilate are a challenge to make a decision for or against the truth of Christ. But Pilate famously responds with a question: ‘What is truth?’ Whether from the intellectual theorising of sceptical philosophers, or bitter life experiences leading to cynicism, he has become distanced even from the normal spontaneous human belief in truth – so he cannot easily open himself to accept Christ, the supreme truth.

In recent times, Western culture has similarly become increasingly sceptical and cynical about the nature of truth and the possibility of reaching it, especially in religious and moral matters. In 1998, Pope St John Paul II wrote in his Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason):

Recent times have seen the rise to prominence of various doctrines which tend to devalue even the truths which had been judged certain... The assumption that all positions are equally valid... is one of today’s most widespread symptoms of the lack of confidence in truth... On this understanding, everything is reduced to opinion; and there is a sense of being adrift... Hence we see among the men and women of our time, and not just in some philosophers, attitudes of widespread distrust of the human being’s great capacity for knowledge. With a false modesty, people rest content with partial and provisional truths, no longer seeking to ask radical questions about the meaning and ultimate foundation of human, personal and social existence. (5)

And Pope Benedict XVI straight before his election spoke of the paradoxical consequence of this in society, which he termed the ‘dictatorship of relativism’ – when it becomes socially or even legally unacceptable to claim *to know truth*, especially in religion or morality. Claimed tolerance is then twisted into something highly intolerant, when dissent from the relativist orthodoxy is crushed in the name of ‘respecting diversity’.

Relativism is basically the claim that ‘What is “true for me” isn’t necessarily “true for you”’ – because, it is said, truth is relative to different individuals, cultures, etc. Opposed to relativism is the belief in absolute truth: the claim (including the claim of Christian faith) that ‘We can know *some* things that are true for everyone, universally’. Relativism is one particular form of *scepticism*, which (at its absolute extreme) is the claim that ‘We can’t really know anything, but should doubt everything’.

Some thinkers actually apply relativism to all our knowledge, including even logic and science (*cognitive relativism*). However, more common is the limited form called *moral relativism*, which applies it only to questions of right and wrong. For example, if there is something that one culture says is ethically right, and another culture says is ethically wrong, then where the non-relativist would say that one or the other of these cultures must be correct and the other mistaken, the relativist says they are *both* right: each is ‘right’ in its own context, and we shouldn’t judge (supposedly).

Scepticism and relativism had already appeared in ancient culture, but were solidly refuted by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC), who was the first to establish logic as a systematic science. The Catholic Church’s pre-eminent theologian and philosopher, St Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), followed Aristotle’s lead on this. This is the branch of philosophy called ‘epistemology’, the theory of knowledge itself.

Fundamentally, the claims of scepticism and relativism are self-contradictory. Relativists and sceptics hold their views to be the truth (otherwise, they do not really ‘hold’ their views at all), and hold their opponents’ belief in absolute truth to be false. But statements such as ‘It is true

that there is no truth' or 'It is absolutely true that there are no absolute truths' refute themselves: if they are true, they are false, since those very statements are presented as true. If there is no absolute truth, then relativism itself cannot be an absolute truth, true for all people.

Relativism doesn't wish to be so 'intolerant' as to say anyone might be *wrong* (except, of course, those terrible non-relativists!) and so wants to say that two contradictory opinions can both be true – 'everyone has their own reality'. But the first principle of logic is the principle of non-contradiction: contradictories *cannot* be true simultaneously. The same thing cannot both be and not be, at the same time and in the same respect.

We don't need to *prove* logical first principles such as this 'principle of non-contradiction' from other statements. Rather, they are experienced as *self-evident* as soon as the meanings of all their terms are properly understood. All we need to do is think carefully about what the words really mean, and we instantly see that the proposition expressed by those words must be true.

'Self-evident' logical truths, and other immediately evident truths, are actually more basic than 'proof'. (Proof is a secondary form of knowledge where a statement, *lacking* immediate evidence, must *derive* its evidential basis by logical steps from other more certain statements.) Immediately evident truths include the existence of things, as known directly in our sense-awareness; self-evident logical truths; and the existence of our own thoughts and self, as known in our self-awareness. From these basic elements, human beings can build up, even before faith, a rational picture of the world – including in the end the foundations of morality, the logical proofs of the spiritual and immortal human soul, and of the existence of God.

The relativist asks, 'I believe this, you believe that – who really knows, how can we tell, or favour one view over another?' But this is only a problem on the false assumption that all we can know is the human mind and its contents: 'This is my opinion, that is your opinion'. In fact, as we all experience, we can also directly know *evidence, reality itself* independent of the mind. This knowledge enables us to assess the truth of different opinions, and identify errors.

We can mention two major sources of the relativist error. The first appeals to human equality, and to a purported humility: 'My beliefs are no better than yours.' Against this, we need to say that virtue resides in the *balanced* position, not the unbalanced extreme – and humility is a genuine balanced virtue only when it keeps its relationship to truth. It is false humility to deny our personal good points or even points of superiority (such as a truth we might know which another person might not). True respect for others includes respectfully sharing with them valuable truths that we ourselves have previously received (and respectfully receiving from them truths that they have previously received). So we don't say, just to be 'humble' and 'polite', 'Well, I believe that $2 + 2 = 4$, but your belief that $2 + 2 = 5$ is just as good as my belief'. (Not all truths are as simple as that, but the point is clear.)

Relativism actually undermines tolerance, openness and dialogue, since these very values can no longer be defended as morally true (as on the relativist view there is no absolute moral truth anyway). And, there is actually nothing to be 'open' to, or to 'dialogue' about, since if relativism is true, no one really knows anything about actual reality, so no one has anything truly worthwhile to share. So presenting itself as 'open' to everything, relativism gets nothing.

A second main source of relativism is the idea that all our thoughts are merely products of our backgrounds – our genes, upbringing, environment, culture, class, gender, language, conceptual framework, place in history, evolutionary background ('hard-wiring') and so on – and so cannot be trusted to give us genuine insight into how the world really is, absolutely and for all people.

So are we simply ‘prisoners’ of all the non-rational factors in our backgrounds in this way? No, we actually experience ourselves as validly knowing various truths (as shown above), so this ‘prisoner’ hypothesis must be false. A valid theory of human nature must incorporate our actual experience of true knowledge: we don’t know all things, but we definitely know some things, and a view of human nature that cannot incorporate this fact is out of court from the start. So rather than being ‘prisoners’, what we logically must say instead (to avoid the self-contradiction of relativism) is that we are each channelled by our own backgrounds towards *particular windows onto absolute truth*. And while the *contradictory* beliefs of two people cannot both be true, the *valid* personal perspectives each of us has (based on our individual apprehensions of immediately evident truths) are *mutually complementary* – so we can learn from each other.

The unproven materialist theory of human nature (that we are composed of nothing but matter, with the result that we, and our thoughts, are indeed totally prisoners of material forces) does in fact imply relativism or scepticism (it can ultimately be shown). But this means, not that relativism is true (which we already know is incorrect, from our experience of immediately evident truths), but rather that materialism, *since* it implies relativism, must itself be false. (And if relativism *were* true, then our supposed knowledge of materialism itself would be merely relative, and untrustworthy.) It logically remains that only the immaterial aspect of human beings, the spirit, with its power of directly intuiting abstract universals, and rational truth, enables the knowledge of absolute truth that we experience ourselves to possess. And this spiritual faculty of reason enables us to discern where various material factors channel us towards valid insights, or where they tend to lead us astray (and so must be corrected for).

It is not the aim of this paper to prove *in detail* the existence of the immaterial human spirit. If a materialist maintains that materialism does *not* necessarily imply relativism, and that it is therefore possible to rightly reject relativism while maintaining materialism, that is a discussion for another time. The point here is that either way, relativism is not proven – because either (i) although materialism, if true, *would* indeed imply relativism, in fact materialism itself is unproven (and furthermore, is actually proven false, precisely *because* it would imply relativism, which, as we saw, contradicts self-evident truths); or (ii) materialism *does not* actually imply relativism anyway. So, the argument for relativism based on our thoughts being mere products of non-rational material factors falls to the ground.

The rejection of the error of relativism is crucial, not just for rational knowledge, but for healthy religious faith. When faith is received into a corrupted seedbed of relativist thinking, it becomes contaminated itself, and we tend to think things like, ‘Well, *I* believe in Christ as the Son of God – but really that’s just my opinion, the way I happened to be brought up.’ And so, subtly we start to think that Christian faith isn’t *actually* objectively true after all, but is, rather, just a feature of the subjective psychology of one particular class of religious believers.

This dilutes both the motivation to live by it wholeheartedly, and the confidence to share it with others (since if faith is merely our subjective opinion and not true in objective reality, sharing our faith could appear to be foisting our subjective personal preferences on others). More deeply, faith is poisoned at its very source, by undermining the certainty of our personal trust in the objective truth of God’s word. So the Church’s repeated teaching against relativism in recent decades isn’t just an academic exercise, but goes to the heart of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Confronted with the relativistic fallacy, the believer faces a fundamental choice: to make relativism the ultimate context for everything (and implicitly deny faith), or to keep faith the ultimate context. They can’t both be ultimate. So either we can relativise and say, ‘I’m a Christian...but in the end that’s *nothing more* than one subjective opinion among many’. Or, we can remain true to the Word of God as it has been made known to us, and hold on to genuine saving faith – by judging of the kaleidoscope of human views and opinions in the ultimate context of that divine Word, which itself cannot be judged by anything more ultimate.

APPENDIX 1: POINT FORM SUMMARY OF THE LOGIC AGAINST RELATIVISM

SOME BASIC DEFINITIONS

- **Relativism:** The claim that ‘*What is “true for me” isn’t necessarily “true for you”*’ – versus belief in **absolute truth**: the claim (including the claim of Christian faith) that ‘*We can know some things that are true for everyone, universally*’. Relativism is a particular form of **scepticism**, which (at its absolute extreme) is the claim that ‘*We can’t really know anything, but should doubt everything*’.
- **Philosophical relativism** – The view that ‘*We cannot know absolute truth (even by reason): either about anything at all (**cognitive relativism**); or at least about morality – good and evil (**moral relativism**)*’.
- **Theological relativism:** The view that, in particular, ‘*We cannot say there is only one religion which is fully and absolutely true*’.

SOME ARGUMENTS THAT PEOPLE MIGHT GIVE FOR PHILOSOPHICAL RELATIVISM

- (1) Equality, humility: ‘My beliefs are no better than yours.’
- (2) ‘All our beliefs are mere products of our genes, upbringing, environment, culture, class, gender, language, conceptual framework, place in history, evolutionary background (‘hard-wiring’), etc.’

THE REFUTATION OF SCEPTICISM AND RELATIVISM

- The claims of absolute scepticism and cognitive relativism are self-contradictory. Statements such as ‘It is true that there is no truth’ or ‘It is absolutely true that there are no absolute truths’ refute themselves: if they are true, they are false.
- “‘True” means “True *for me*”, says the relativist. But this relativist re-definition of the word ‘truth’ is useless – it just leaves us looking for another English term besides ‘true’ to mean ‘corresponds to actual reality’ – a concept we still need.
- But what if ‘everyone has their own reality’? If we mean equally valid *contradictory* versions of reality, that is impossible, since *contradictories cannot be true at the same time*.
- Can we prove this first principle of reality and thought, the principle of non-contradiction (i.e. ‘The same thing cannot both be and not be [at the same time and in the same respect]’)?
 - We do not need to (and cannot) *prove* logical first principles like this, since they are experienced as *self-evident* as soon as the meaning that has been assigned to their terms is understood (both understanding each individual term and holding the terms together as unified into one proposition).
 - All we need to do is really think about the self-evident proposition (the concepts, not just the material words) and we then see that it must be true. To fail to see such a truth is a case of intellectual blindness. But it is impossible to force someone to see: we can only invite them to look.

- Another simple example of a self-evident truth is: 'Whatever is green is coloured'. These are not merely truths about language: when we translate this English sentence into another language, both the English sentence and the translated sentence (linguistic entities) correspond to one and the same conceptually necessary *proposition* (a conceptual entity, in which the concepts are perceived to have a necessary relationship with each other).
- 'Self-evident' truth or 'immediately evident' truth is more basic than 'proof'. Proof is a secondary form of knowledge where a statement, lacking immediate evidence, must *derive* its evidential basis from other statements. (Immediately evident truths include the existence of sensed realities; self-evident logical truths; awareness of our own thoughts and self; rudimentary memories of highest clarity.)

SOME BASIC ANSWERS TO THE TWO RELATIVIST ARGUMENTS ABOVE

Response to Argument 1 (equality and humility):

- Virtue lies in 'the mean' (i.e. the *balanced* position). Humility, tolerance, politeness are genuine virtues only when they keep their relationship to truth. It is false humility to deny our personal good points or even points of superiority (such as a truth we might know which another person might not). True respect for others includes sharing with them respectfully, valuable truths we ourselves have received (and respectfully receiving from them truths they have received).
- Relativism actually undermines tolerance, openness and dialogue, since these very values can no longer be defended as morally true; and there is nothing to be 'open' to, or to 'dialogue' about anyway, since if relativism is true, no one really knows anything about actual reality, so no one has anything truly worthwhile to share. So trying for everything, relativism gets nothing.

Response to Argument 2 (that 'our beliefs are mere products of non-rational factors'):

- Are we simply 'prisoners' of our backgrounds? No, we actually experience ourselves as validly knowing various truths, as shown above to be the case, so this 'prisoner' hypothesis must be false. A valid theory of human nature must incorporate such experience of true knowledge. We don't know all things, but we do know some things. So rather than being 'prisoners', what we find is that we are channelled by our personal backgrounds towards *particular windows into absolute truth* – in this way, each with our own *complementary* perspectives, we can learn from each other.
 - The unproven materialist theory of human nature (that we are composed of nothing but matter, and so we and our thoughts are totally prisoners of non-rational material forces) indeed implies relativism or scepticism. But this means, not that relativism is true (which we know from all the above is incorrect), but that materialism, *since* it implies relativism, must itself be false. Thus we show that only the immaterial aspect of human beings, the spirit, enables the knowledge of absolute truth we experience ourselves to possess. The spiritual faculty of reason enables us to discern where various material factors channel us towards valid insights, or where they tend to lead us astray (and so must be corrected for).
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- ‘I believe this, you believe that – who really knows, how can we tell, or favour one view over another?’ This is only a problem on the false presupposition that all we can know is the human mind and its contents: ‘This is my opinion, that is your opinion’. In fact, as we all experience, we can also directly know *evidence, reality itself* independent of the mind. This knowledge enables us to assess the truth of different opinions, and identify errors. (And if we can’t truly know reality itself, how would we even know – since we can’t ‘look into their minds’ – that the other person has a different opinion?)
- This is also part of why it is not ‘arrogant’ to hold to evident truths with certainty, to share these with others, and perhaps to try to influence society in accordance with these certain truths. I am not ‘imposing *myself*’ thereby. The truths are known features of shared *reality*, not of *me*, and would remain so even if I, personally, unfortunately changed to the opposite (false) opinion: the evidence would remain the evidence.

MORAL RELATIVISM

- Moral relativism is refuted in the same general way as relativism generally. Moral knowledge is founded on immediately evident *moral* truths of practical reason and basic goods (a separate topic).
- Concerning ‘judging’: we can’t judge the guilt or innocence (now or in eternity) of souls, of persons – people can be blameless for evil choices due to ignorance or reduced freedom. But everyone can, and must, make assessments of *moral truth* – what makes for the genuine spiritual health of human beings.

THEOLOGICAL RELATIVISM

- The special case of theological relativism has the extra ‘difficulty’ of the uniqueness of Christ and of Catholic faith. It comes down to God’s right of initiative: amidst human religious strivings, is God allowed to reveal himself, for the fulfilment of those strivings? And if the evidence (such as from philosophy, miracles, scripture and history) shows that he *has* revealed himself in this unique way, what must the human response be?
- The answer is, we must acknowledge God’s Revelation with humility, and place certain and complete faith in the absolute truth of his revealed word (while still acknowledging and honouring the seeds of truth and goodness that God has also scattered elsewhere, which lead towards Christ).

APPENDIX 2: 'ONE WAY OF SALVATION', EQUALITY AND INCLUSIVITY

Jesus proclaims himself in the gospels as the unique way to salvation: 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.' (*Jn 14:6*)

Now, in our democratic era we are very wary of 'exclusivity'. The idea of an 'exclusive club' or of a social class conceived of as 'better than other people' goes against our belief in the equality of all human beings. Indeed, as Catholics we rightly hold that all human beings are equal by sharing the same nature; by having the same basic rights; and by being equally redeemed by Christ, and equally called to a divine destiny.

Yet as with any idea, if the ideal of equality is misapplied or taken to unbalanced extremes it leads us astray. The ideal can be falsely extended in various ways that even damage true human equality and well-being. So people sometimes have the vague feeling that everyone's *ideas* should be treated as equal – especially their religious ideas or their ideas about right and wrong. This is a major ingredient in the relativism so common today. 'All people are equal' is twisted into 'All religions are equal'. (Taken to its logical conclusion, equality of ideas would mean we would have to treat as equal even discriminatory and racist ideas that actually negate equality of persons.)

So certainly, we give equal respect to all *people* as they sincerely put forth their beliefs. But this doesn't mean that the *beliefs* themselves are all of equal value. As we all experience, we are all capable of error, and putting false beliefs on the same level as beliefs that have been proven true is irrational and wrong, in particular when we are talking about truths of good and evil, or about truths that God has spoken and vouched for to the human race.

So Jesus does teach an 'inequality' among religions and paths to salvation: there is only one Flock under one Shepherd (*Jn 10:16*), only one Name by which we can be saved (*Acts 4:12*). And we fully belong to this one Flock through accepting the one Baptism and the one true Faith, the truth with which our Shepherd feeds us. So there are the man-made religions on the one hand, but on the other, the religion God himself has given, that purifies and fulfils them all.

But unlike an exclusive club, all people are equally invited to be *included* in this one Flock by accepting Baptism and believing and following the true Faith: all are equally welcome. 'There are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well.' (*Jn 10:16*) So the unity of the one Flock and one Shepherd is not 'exclusionary' of any human being. It is God's gift offered to all humanity to humbly accept (and not our own doing, as though we who *have* accepted it could boast about it).

Neither does it exclude any of the rich diversity God has created: every race, culture, nation and individual is not only to be included, welcomed and preserved in its integrity, but finds its highest fulfilment by being united with God in Christ. Only the 'diversity' of sin and error (that actually damages human beings) is purged away, the more deeply we enter into this union of the one Flock under one Shepherd.

So we do not negate, but rather welcome and honour, the numerous seeds of goodness and truth – reflections of Christ – God has planted also among those who are not yet visibly part of Christ's One Flock. Very often, of course, they have not yet had any real way of knowing the One Shepherd. They can still receive his salvation if by grace they follow God's will as they understand it. Even so, we owe it to them to share the precious gift of knowing, even in this life, their true Shepherd and all he offers.

We are links in a chain, and dare not refuse to pass along to others what has previously been passed to us: as our equals, they have an equal right to the truth. At the same time, in

understanding and honouring the gifts already possessed by those with whom we are sharing, we are ourselves led to a deeper awareness of facets of Christ's fullness we had not yet fully understood.

In sum, there is nothing which is in the slightest exclusionary, unwelcoming, arrogant or elitist about Jesus' teaching of there being 'only one Flock and one Shepherd' – one Saviour, one true Church, one true Faith. Any embarrassment or diffidence about this beautiful teaching of the perfect unity in diversity to which the Good Shepherd invites all people in his Catholic Church, is confused and misplaced – a residue perhaps of the relativism we have absorbed from the surrounding culture.

True, when sharing with others who might themselves be confused about these things, we may need to express ourselves prudently, so as not to be misunderstood as bombastic and blowing *our own* trumpet (which in truth is Christ's). But for ourselves, we will have full confidence that we should be united as closely as possible with the one Shepherd in his one Flock, and should always aim to invite others into the joy of that unity.

Perfect unity of faith and of charity, expressed and nourished as we share the one Bread of Life: thus we live to the full the way, not only of unity and truth, but of love, inclusivity, welcoming, equality, humility, respect for rightful diversity and freedom. In short, the way modelled for us by the Good Shepherd himself.

From Catholic teaching:

'With the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ, God has willed that the Church founded by him be the instrument for the salvation of *all* humanity (cf. *Acts* 17:30-31) (Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* 17; Pope St John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio* 11) This truth of faith does not lessen the sincere respect which the Church has for the religions of the world, but at the same time, it rules out, in a radical way, that mentality of indifferentism "characterised by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that 'one religion is as good as another'" (Pope St John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* 36). If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation...'

'*Equality*, which is a presupposition of inter-religious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content, nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ – who is God himself made man – in relation to the founders of the other religions. Indeed, the Church, guided by charity and respect for freedom, must be primarily committed to proclaiming to all people the truth definitively revealed by the Lord, and to announcing the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ and of adherence to the Church through Baptism and the other sacraments, in order to participate fully in communion with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus, the certainty of the universal salvific will of God does not diminish, but rather increases the duty and urgency of the proclamation of salvation and of conversion to the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Declaration *Dominus Iesus*

'On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church'
Holy See, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 6 August 2000