PLURALISM - RELATIVISM – TOLERANCE

A Summary

To properly understand the Bible we must see each verse in its cultural and historical context. In other words, any interpreter of ancient literature is trying to discover how each word and sentence was understood by those who read it in their own language at the time it was written. After the original meaning is understood, the underlying principles can be applied to our life context. Although this is basic methodology, it is rarely considered by the average Bible reader who treats the Scriptures as if they had just been penned in twenty-first century English. This results in people inserting a twenty-first century mindset back into a historical and cultural context where it didn’t exist.

A CHANGING WORLD

Shifts in society usually take place gradually. They begin in the realm of philosophy, then they work their way through art and music, then culture in general, and finally filter into theology. This progression can be diagramed as follows (Francis A. Schaeffer, The God Who is There, 16):

PHILOSOPHY — ART — MUSIC — GENERAL CULTURE — THEOLOGY

This flow of philosophy into culture influences the way the average person reads the Bible. It is therefore imperative that we are aware of the cultural influences around us. Some significant ideas in American culture that commonly color the way we read Scripture are pluralism, relativism, and tolerance. Though the meaning of these terms is debated, the following may help to explain some of the changes that have taken place in the thought processes of pop culture.

PLURALISM, RELATIVISM, TOLERANCE

Pluralism is a social fact. It simply means that there are many different and opposing beliefs, cultures, values, morals, customs, etc. that exist. In America, pluralism is also the recognition that those who differ from you have a right to their difference, even if you disagree.

Relativism is a philosophical belief system used to evaluate or interpret pluralism. Relativism says that since we are all finite and since we have no standard or criterion to measure truth by, no one should presume to know more than anyone else. Therefore, it argues that there is no such thing as absolute truth but that all truth is subjective and constantly changing, so every point of view in a pluralistic society is equally valid.
“Practically speaking, the only truth is that there is no truth, or at least no objective access to that truth. . . We are all confined to our own ideas of what is right or wrong, true or false. But whatever our conclusions may be, they are merely our opinions, and our opinions are no better than those of another.” (Michael Patton)

Therefore, relativists conclude that it is naïve or arrogant to say that we know the truth or that those who disagree with us are wrong. “The only "wrong" that we are likely to commit, according to the relativist, is to condemn or judge the beliefs of another. This is a failure of openness, caused by ethnocentrism and bigotry” (Dick Keyes).

Relativism expresses itself in many ways. When people say, “That may be true for you” or “it doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you believe” they are expressing a belief in relativism; namely, that “truth” is an individual matter not an objective fact. In this understanding it is possible for us to have contradictory beliefs and both of us be correct. In Christian circles I often hear relativism expressed when people say things like “That is just your interpretation!” or “What this verse means to me is . . .” The first comment assumes that interpretation is just opinion; the second is the belief that a verse’s meaning is whatever you think it is. In both cases the underlying assumption is that no one has the right to challenge what I think because every view is equally valid.

“Tolerance is living side by side with others who have real and deep differences with us, but living with respect and civility in our personal attitude, and as much as is possible, in public policy.” (Dick Keyes).

“But in reality, this is not what typical postmoderns (the people of our generation) mean when they cry for “tolerance.” They are not asking people to simply tolerate and get along with the opposing belief. The fact is that they are asking people to compromise their beliefs. They are asking me to concede that my neighbor’s beliefs are just as true as mine, to forfeit my notion of objectivity, and to surrender my view of exclusivism” (Michael Patton).

A number of observations should be made:

1) The present concept of “tolerance” is not coherent, for in order to tolerate something you must first disagree with it. But if we live by the assumption that there is no absolute truth and all differences are equally valid; the question then becomes what are we tolerating?

2) Pluralism has always existed, but how it is approached varies from age to age. In the age of modernism (1900-1950?), differences introduced by a pluralistic society led to robust discussion, for it was believed that through the process of debate the truth would eventually surface. Tolerance was directed toward the individual; people tolerated people whose beliefs they disagreed with.

But a major shift has taken place in the age of post-modernism (our age). Tolerance is no longer directed toward the individual, it is directed toward the belief. Tolerance doesn’t simply mean accepting the right of a person to hold opposing opinions; it means that we must accept that their beliefs are equally true as our own. In other words, we must forfeit the right to believe that there are absolute truths in order to be considered tolerant.
In the end, the postmodern idea of tolerance is actually less tolerant than the tolerance under modernism. Instead of respecting the individual and disagreeing with their beliefs, under the new tolerance the individual who believes that there are absolute, timeless truths is immediately labeled as a naïve, arrogant, ethnocentric bigot (see below), and the doors for discussion close. Liberal Tolerance is neither liberal nor tolerant” (Beckwith).

3) In reality, relativism has become a totalitarian system that claims to be the only absolute truth with which to interpret all other systems of thought.

All of this has huge ramifications for the Christian faith.

Francis Beckwith writes,

“Liberal Tolerance is perhaps the primary challenge to the Christian worldview current in North American popular culture. . .

Liberal tolerance is grounded in relativism, the view that no one point of view on moral and religious knowledge is objectively correct for every person in every time and place. This notion, as understood and embraced in popular culture, feeds on the fact of pluralism, the reality of a plurality of different and contrary opinions on religious and moral matters. Against this backdrop, many in our culture conclude that one cannot say that one’s view on religious and moral matters is better than anyone else’s view. They assert that it is a mistake to claim that one’s religious beliefs are exclusively correct and that believers in other faiths, no matter how sincere or devoted, hold false beliefs. Thus, religious inclusivism is the correct position to hold.

Liberal tolerance is not what it appears to be, however. It is a partisan philosophical perspective with its own set of dogmas. It assumes, for instance, a relativistic view of moral and religious knowledge. This assumption has shaped the way many people think about issues such as homosexuality, abortion rights, and religious truth claims, leading them to believe that a liberally tolerant posture concerning these issues is the correct one and that it ought to be reflected in our laws and customs. . . .

Liberal tolerance is a sham. Although portrayed by its advocates as an open, tolerant, and neutral perspective, it is a dogma whose proponents tolerate no rivals. Those of us who are concerned with presenting and defending our faith in a post-Christian culture must be aware of this sort of challenge, one that masquerades as open, tolerant, and liberating, but in reality is dogmatic, partisan, and coercive.

Although the Christian worldview is marginalized in our culture and considered dangerous by some, we cannot lose our confidence. After all, this is God’s universe, and He has made human beings in His image. We must be confident that when we unpack these undeniable notions that are “written on our hearts,” those who unreflectively and unthinkingly dismiss our case really do know the truth as well (Rom.2:15). But this must be balanced with the knowledge that the
human heart is incredibly wicked (Jer.17:9). This tension will remain as long as we attempt to defend our faith in a culture hostile to the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus of Nazareth.”

Dick Keyes adds some very insightful comments on this whole subject (the excerpts that follow are compiled from different papers he has written, so the continuity of thought is not as good as the original manuscripts):

“When considering relativism, I often think of the example of a lifeguard on a beach who has an elevated chair so he can look down over everybody and see what is going on. He has a perspective that nobody else on the beach has. Everybody else has his or her feet in the sand, cannot see beyond immediate neighbors. But the lifeguard has an elevated chair from which to see the whole beach. Relativism tells us that nobody has that elevated view when it comes to religion. Everybody is at ground level, with only his or her local perspective.

Relativism claims that we have a lot of people from different perspectives saying what they think ultimate truth is, but that these people are simply expressing their own beliefs. They are attempting to name what is not namable. Relativism claims that it does not make sense to talk about some religions being true and other religions being false; doing so brings the wrong categories to the discussion. To the relativist no religions are true or false. Certainly none are true in any way that would exclude any others being true. They are all true in that they do more or less the same job; they express the deepest human longings and are means for achieving social cohesion; they help hold societies together and give them a sense of unity and common purpose.

Just as you would never say that vanilla ice cream is the only true ice cream and chocolate ice cream is false ice cream because you prefer vanilla, so also the relativist says you should never speak in such a way about your religious preferences. The issues of true and false have no place in the discussion.

Relativism’s Intolerance of Pluralism

Despite relativism’s celebration of pluralism, in fact it does not even tolerate pluralism, except in this token and condescending way. Pluralism states that there is a plurality of religious and philosophical options. Relativism, rightly understood, argues that there is not in fact a plurality of ultimate truths at all, but only one single ultimate truth that explains all the other pretenders. One is left not with plurality, but with uniformity at the level of ultimate belief.

The relativist is a closet absolutist. You may have heard the idea that all religions are ways, or paths, up the same mountain. As these paths travel up the mountain the climber has no clue that there are actually other roads up the same mountain. When he finally gets to the top of the mountain and sees God, the person realizes that he was not on the only road at all, but that there are lots of people on their way to God by all sorts of paths or religions.
This mountain analogy sounds very humble and makes any people who disagree with it feel ignorant, small minded, and arrogant if they think that their road is the only road. But the real question to ask is – where is the person standing who is describing this mountain? He or she must be in an airplane in order to see the whole mountain. Why is the relativist the only one who gets to have an airplane when all others sweat and trudge up their roads in ignorance?

The relativist is not just giving us a lovely picture of openness. The relativist is giving one exclusive model to understand all the religions of the world. Relativism is an over-religion or a meta-religion that forces all religions into its mold. It sounds humble and willing to admit the fallibility of human knowing, but it produces a single vision of ultimate truth that excludes all other contenders . . .

Relativism denies pluralism, the idea that there are different options that differ substantially from each other. Relativism actually destroys pluralism. It homogenizes all differences so they are seen as basically the same. In the relativist’s own illustration, pluralism is represented by these poor people struggling up the road on the mountain, all of them in the same ignorance about what they are doing.

Think of what this means for specific religions. For instance, the Christian faith affirms a belief in a personal God. Buddhism denies a personal God. Relativism says that these two religions are really the same in their most basic convictions. This is a homogenizing process that obscures the real differences.

So, for the relativist all views are one view. All religions are paths to salvation. But here we must ask, what does salvation mean? The different religions have very different views of salvation. Which salvation gets to be the one that we are talking about? For Buddhism salvation is nirvana. The Buddhist finally leaves behind all his desires and even his experience of his individuality. Compare this to the Muslim view of salvation. At least for the hijackers of recent fame, it meant that they would be met by seventy-two dark-eyed virgins who would be committed to indulging their every desire.

Whose salvation are we talking about? Whose heaven? If you take the relativist line, you have got to acknowledge that we really cannot say anything about the nature of salvation because the moment a person does, that person has excluded somebody else’s view. So the only thing to say is that we know nothing. But that does not get anyone very far. So salvation generically is defined as “enabling a truly moral life” or “keeping the forces of despair at bay.” The intriguing thing is that those statements do not sound like they are coming out of any of the world religions but more like modern western liberal humanism forced onto the plurality of world religions.
Relativism refuses to be relativized

Confusion is guaranteed unless we realize that relativism works at two levels in many of our discussions. On the one level, it is a philosophical doctrine, one among other contenders. But on the other level, it is a meta-philosophy, telling us how to understand all doctrines from all sources. This explains why it can sound so humble one minute, as if only the relativist has taken human fallibility fully into account, but can sound so arrogant the next minute, as if the relativist alone has been granted a vision of ultimate truth. It is one view, but demands to be the paradigm through which all views are known.

... As we have seen, the cutting edge of relativism's critique is to say that all ultimate religious and philosophical beliefs are properly understood not as possible sources of true knowledge about God or ultimate truth, but as only products of their culture's groping to name the unnamable. But at the same time, relativism claims for itself immunity from the force of its own critique. We are meant to believe that it alone is not just a product of the relativizing factors in its own (modern, Western, academic, tenure-seeking) culture, but that it is in some mysterious sense, objectively, timelessly true. It comes to us through an epistemological immaculate perception, whereby it miraculously escapes the acid bath of relativizing analysis. This is the "overbite" of relativism.

... Relativism is the real opiate of the people. It discourages serious discussion of the most important issues, and dampens the challenges of pluralism, enabling people to sleepwalk through the most important choices of their lives. The questions having to do with God's existence and character are no longer urgent, since they are matters not of truth, but only of private opinion and preference, and have no final consequence.

If, however, pluralism really does exist at the level of ultimate truth, then honesty dictates that we take that plurality seriously. In fact, there are differences in ultimate outlook that are difficult to deny. There is a difference between a God who is personal, a God who is impersonal, and the absence of God altogether. There is a difference between a final judgment after death, a series of many reincarnations, and simple cessation of consciousness. The cause of mutual understanding is not served by pretending that these are superficial or negligible differences.

Religious pluralism is nothing new. The start of the Christian faith was in the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire in the first century was possibly more pluralistic than modern America. It was more radically diverse in the different religious movements. The Christian faith, with its claims to Christ's uniqueness, grew and thrived exactly in that kind of setting. Pluralism in the modern world may surprise the church today, but it offers no new challenge to the Christian faith.
Ironically, there is a special relevance of the New Testament for us now in dealing with pluralism. Far from putting us in a new paradigm, pluralism puts us back into the first century, right into the setting of the book of Acts. Pluralism was exactly what the Apostle Paul was facing as soon as he stepped out the front door of a synagogue onto the main street of any gentile city.”

http://worldwidefreeresources.com/upload/Keyes_TheUniqueness.pdf