

Moral Relativism: Roots and Fruits

Glenn A. Olds, Ph.D.

Our modern era has lost the sense of the cosmic status of value, sundering the classical conviction that *reality* and *value* belong together. In first its method and then its philosophies, it has narrowed “reality” to be the measurable and manageable, what can be predicted and controlled, and it has relegated “value” to the purely personal, subjective, and relative. This schism makes possible the easy transition to the primacy of power over persuasion, the argument of the club and gun over reason, and the noisy and nasty denominationalism that characterizes our time. It domesticates the Divine, captured in reductionistic and narrow frames, and makes might right, power arbiter of value, and turns our world into a teeming battleground increasingly perilous in the possession and pursuit of power, and the passion for it, locked up in our grasp of nuclear potential.

The preoccupation with *objects* not *subjects*, *control* not *compassion*, *prediction* not *persuasion*, *means* not *ends*, *facts* not *values* has brought us to the brink of disaster. It has made box cutters in the hands of fanatics as lethal as legions and defense of liberty more costly than its nurture. Power is no longer what we look at, but that through which we look at everything else.

The innocence of the roots of this development is as dangerous as it is unconscious. Beginning with the innocent Cartesian conviction that doubt should sanitize and clarify the lens of consciousness to give us an indubitable, rock bottom assurance of truth, that is *dubito ergo sum* or more popularly *cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am!” it slipped innocently into the conviction that only what can be “observed” or “sensed” revealed in “controlled experiment,” and “proved” by formal logic could be known or held to be true about reality.

It should have been easy to discern the fate of “values,” even the “self” or “God,” in such a restricted theory of reality and the truth about it. No one had ever claimed that “value,” “self,” or “God” could be “sensed” as with a rose or a road. Nor was “value” a conclusion of any formal syllogism, to subject to manipulation or control by any empirical experiment. One does not “see” value, the self, or the Divine, as one would a landscape or a falling ball.

“Value” escapes these epistemological requirements for an early and limited science bent on knowing the measurable and manageable external world. But then, before the striking successes of the “natural” science in the early centuries of the modern era, it was to be expedient and fashionable to exclude all else from dependable knowledge. It did not occur to those early “scientists” that so narrow a definition of what was scientifically “knowable” would become a touchstone for the rest, the whole of reality. Indeed, in this earlier period of striking successes and extension of the “scientific method,” it was both possible and profitable to hold on to the classical assumptions about value, the self, the Good, and even God, which were never presumed to have been “sensed” in the narrowly scientific description. They comprised the setting and condition for the knowing enterprise. For the continental rationalist and British empiricists alike, the “knowing” enterprise, much less our “being”, they were presuppositions, conditions for knowing at all.

With Kant’s Critical Philosophy there was an early warning, that the British empiricist, David Hume, had awakened him from his “dogmatic slumbers.” Kant was quick to affirm that the entire knowing enterprise, pure and practical reason and aesthetic awareness, was set in a larger context of presuppositions, which required the soul and God to account for the enterprise at all. And with Kierkegaard’s anguished critique that the irreducibly “personal” eludes the net of our rational, scientific constructs, the long march toward a totally secularized and sanitized view of knowing, and the fate of value, never claimed to be known or testable in this narrow scientific frame of what was presumed to be true or real, was assured.

With this steady ascendancy of this narrow “scientism” becoming a full-fledged and presumed inclusive philosophy, the stage was set for the agonizing triumph in modern times of the ancient presumption in the pre-philosophical twilight, that “might makes right,” the “values” not endorsed in reality were the banner/response of the strong, and confirmed the retreat of reason from this arena of human action and accountability. Indeed, Plato and Aristotle, anchoring their two traditions in the West, made it clear that if value judgments were only and purely private preferences, there would be no cosmic grounding of the Good as alternative to questions of power, and no anchoring of human action in appeal to moral principle, which surpassed personal preference or arbitrary power.

Indeed, emergence of this ancient sophistry concerning the Good became, first subtly by assumption, and latterly self-consciously and muscularly the credo of our time.

Widespread conviction that the sciences were “neutral,” value free in their descriptions and prescriptions, made them easy and innocent instruments of power, political, ideological, and religious. The fashioning and release of the first atomic bomb galvanized the concern of Einstein, then other

scientists, especially those knowledgeable of the “bomb’s” potential, that a new and horrendous force had been released in the world.

It was clear to Einstein, and swiftly others, that so-called “neutral science,” cut free of any cosmic constraints of cosmic value, was indeed a fiction. That “science” was not morally neutral, but was capable, without value constraints, of incredible carnage, became instantly clear. “Value” consideration could not be left to subjective whim or the largest club. Either there were cosmic and rational grounds for the good, or we were victims of whomever wields the most power.

It was this knowledge, more than almost any other, that prompted the founding of the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Commission. Indeed, as the preamble of the United Nation’s charter begins, its founding was to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” now known in the devastating effects of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was clear that such “power,” tribute to our human knowledge and exploitation of nature, could not save us, but unless brought under international control, would indeed destroy us. It is why the current crisis in North Korea is focused by the Atomic Energy concern from their monitoring process as a more fundamental breach of security than all our armies.

This progressive banning of any cosmic or Divine dimension of reality is easiest to trace in its 19th-century history, in the impulse and shadow of its three “innocent” protagonists, Marx, Darwin, and Freud.

In 1848, Marx’ release of his Communist Manifesto made it clear from his earlier theological studies and Hebraic-Christian traditions that a better substitute for talking about God was to talk about man in a loud voice. (Karl Barth’s (1) trenchant phrase from the next century!) A decade later (1858) with release of Darwin’s Origin of the Species, the “innocence” was taken a step further. Even the theist’s precarious claim that God was needed at least to get creation started was trumped by Darwin’s reduction of the creative process to “natural selection” and pushing even further necessity for Divine intervention in the process. The final blow came from Freud as the century closed and opened on a new scientific era when he “innocently” banned the Divine disclosure from the last bastion of the human soul, as an “illusion!”

The stage was set out free of any cosmic restraint or philosophical criticism, for the rise of every form of unrestrained power, nationalistic, Fascist, and its most virile form in Hitler’s Nationalistic Socialism, and Japan’s Kamikaze’s devotion to Emperor and state.

The mounting tide of disillusionment and fear of misuse of atomic power, which held the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. at bay in the cold war, began emptying a modern Pandora's box. The rash of conflicts, local and regional, saw the 20th century just closed as the most violent in human history. Fed by a growing gap between the rich and poor, and the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, it was predictable that it would begin to erupt around the edges in nasty, noisy displays of the desperate human "bombs" exploding in the market places of the world. It should alert us that something is radically wrong at the heart of our age.

It had yet to become apparent that the triumph of a limited and limiting "scientific method" that presumed to be "value free," had no rational restraint on its hubris and appetite for power. Indeed, it had already "infected" the religious tradition, now rendered relatively irrelevant by the advancing scientific era, and one to which their effort at accommodation became philosophical capitulation.

Even the religious traditions, notably anchored in the Western Theistic tradition of the Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic cultures, seem infected with this same human hubris. Not only are some of our bloodiest battles fought in God's name, but they become the handmaidens of political orthodoxies around the world. Indeed, one of the reasons for failure of the religious spirit to curb our violent "orthodoxies" is their infection at the source, by this same power bent, horizontally-driven passion for "affirming man in a loud voice!" Indeed, this religious sanction is slipping into our political rhetoric, despite the wisdom of our founding fathers in separating church and state, from precisely this peril that drove our Pilgrim Fathers and their successive generations of immigrants to this new land where conscience was to be free of this bondage to cultural idolatry of any form.

Our founding fathers were clear, and we should be, that separation of church and state did not imply abandonment of religious perspective or practice, but only that it would not be permitted to legislate divisive or conflicting public policy. They had seen the fierce wedding of religious absolutism and political power and policy which drove them, often persecuted, from their homeland. They were convinced that men could and would worship the God of their own understanding. But they were equally convinced no such personal religious commitment should ever be transmitted into mandatory public policy, and obligatory on everyone in the commonwealth.

Their clear-minded distinction did not prevent the flowering of every kind of institution and service, personal or public. It did not freeze the religious spirit in some historical form. It permeated, even encouraged, religious pluralism. But it prevented, at bottom, the tendency of every culture and person to idolatry their group and version of the Divine and impose it on the rest.

The peril of a reductionistic scientism to become an enshrined orthodoxy, legislating what could be considered true or false, real or unreal, for the whole of reality, was a dangerous and mistaken extension of useful method in a selective field, to become a new kind of "orthodoxy" presiding over all the rest. It is this dangerous presumption, overshadowing all the rest, that perils our time. It provides religious fire and zeal to every form of human and historical idolatry, which claims to have the only, final, and full version of the truth. It is no less dangerous if claimed to be scientific or skeptical. Indeed, religious zeal behind such feet of clay gave power to Hitler and Tito's arrogant claim of power in their time. We do well to heed it for ourselves.

We can see the urgent and evident complications of this cosmically rudderless clash of values in our time. Traditional values, rooted in our Hebraic, Christian, and Islamic cultures, of concern and responsibility for others, especially the defenseless, women and children, has been dramatically eroded, witnessing in our times shrinking of our foreign aid to foster precisely that help to the lowest of any "developed country" in the world. Now at barely .04 of the GNP, down from our magnanimous 10+% under the Marshall plan to help rebuild Germany and Japan, our erstwhile enemies. Small wonder that nations large and small are troubled by our priorities, and continued and awesome investment in military might while a third of the world goes to bed hungry.

Anyone who has recently traveled abroad will be aware of this strange fear/fascination before our unchallenged power. Even our President's thoughtful assurances that we have no appetite for imperial power or control leave many, even allies, troublingly doubtful over our proclaimed disinterest over the Middle East while remaining its largest consumer of its black gold=97oil. This ambivalent and anxious look is rarely seen by the average American who thinks of himself, and justly so, as generous, open hearted, and, when the chips are down, as in World Wars I and II, Korea, and Bosnia, and now Afghanistan, willing to sacrifice life and substance to the protection of human life and liberty. Yet it is this troubling ambiguity and contradiction that should cause us concern.

A worrisome feature of a resurgent Christian Orthodoxy in our time is its insinuation into structures of political party and practice, in our time flirting with the peril of an earlier European time, when our Puritan Fathers fled to practice religious freedom. It was the same impulse that prompted our founding fathers to separate church and state, and avert it happening here.

As one who has spent a lifetime fostering, teaching, and serving this genuine American spirit of sharing and sacrifice under four presidents, two Democratic (Kennedy and Johnson) and two Republican (Eisenhower and Nixon), I am baffled and appalled that our political parties, people, and leadership

should be so slow to grasp this mounting apprehension. One can celebrate, as I do, the clear-minded tenacity of our President in securing a unanimous Security Council resolution on Iraq. One can further rejoice, as I do, that our splendid Secretary of State celebrates in his person, philosophy, and performance triumph over color, class or claim for power in the acknowledged competence and dedicated service he brings to his awesome task in this moment of our precarious history.

What is needed now is more than appreciation of our national leadership, as important as that is. We need to recover suspicion of any religious orthodoxy presuming to take over political power. Have we forgotten the shrill tones of Pat Buchanan's aspiring presidential speech of that forgotten bid for the presidency? It must have been an embarrassment to the first President Bush, whose Yale training gave him clear-eyed understanding of our history, and the compelling reasons for separation of church and state.

Beyond that, there are some immediate, urgent, and achievable objectives, to which all of us, of whatever party or none, can be enlisted to serve. These should be on every citizen's agenda and New Year list:

- an unabashed optimism about the human potential and capacity to share;
- a radically "democratic" sense that every person is deserving of dignity and freedom;
- a new humility about our person and providential place in the sun;
- a fresh commissioning of our talents, energy, and resources to address the world needs;
- commitment to bend our resources to address the unsolved problems of health and survival of our world;
- realignment of our resources away from weaponry to "livingry";
- celebration of sacrifice as a public virtue constrained by humanity and justice;
- serious support for the United Nations, modeled after our own federal systems;
- fostering leadership to strengthen, reform as needed, and lead through an empowered United Nations;
- revitalization of the Peace Corps model to enlist and support a new call for civil service;
- expand the concept of the R.O.T.C. to include training in Peace Keeping as well as war making;
- understanding that "under God" calls for humility and tolerance, not arrogance and self-righteousness.

These are but a few hints at the untapped resources at our door to demonstrate to a needy and skeptical world we still know how to "put our money where our mouth is!" That we are still ready to go anywhere, do anything our world requires to survive and strengthen the human condition and *freedom under law*! And that we, too, are constrained by justice "under God."

It would be neat if someone would come up with another imaginative and unprecedented announcement such as that of our young President Kennedy, "Before the decade is out, we will land a man on the moon!" One can barely remember the chilled excitement of that announcement, and the even more arresting moment in July, 1969, when we watched awestruck and amazed as our first man planted the flag on that vast moonscape, and we saw, for the first time, our small spinning "space craft," the earth, from beyond itself, spinning there in silent orbit, humbling and moving us to empowering reverence all at once.

Are there not more such moments awaiting us? We have not begun to imagine what a providential Universe, released human energy beyond narrow egocentric serving, and a global human commitment to that larger community of which we are a part can discover and bring to pass. Cannot the dream of every child born into the world bring that assurance of which the Indian poet Tagore spoke, "That God is not yet discouraged with man!"? Isn't the chance of life, liberty, and happiness their birthright as well as our own?

Some things money can't buy! We knew that before we had any! Have we come so far from those humble beginnings, whether at Plymouth Rock or the Western Frontier that it is now only our material wealth that has become the envy of the world? I hope not, for the world's sake, and our own.

Note:

1. Karl Barth (1886-1968), Swiss Protestant theologian. His published works include *Church Dogmatics* (1932).