

Are There No Absolutes?

by Richard Ochs

One cannot go very long in our so-called “postmodern” world without being exposed to the thought that “all truth is relative,” or as it is more commonly put, “There are no absolutes.” It takes very little insight to see that such statements are self-contradictory. “There are no absolutes” is itself an absolute statement, as is the statement that “all truth is relative.” Though logically invalid, such concepts continue to float freely in our society. Why is this? Some may hold such views because of a lack of clear thinking, but for many others the reason for embracing this relativistic view is that it supposedly liberates them from having any moral absolutes imposed on them. “I’m free to do what I want any old time,” says the Rolling Stones song, in a good summation of the moral relativism that permeates our culture. This sounds very appealing, but the idea of “no absolutes” is, in fact, one of the most terrifying concepts imaginable. Consider the awful implications that flow logically from this position.

Morals

In the area of morals, if there are no absolutes, nothing is really objectively right or wrong. What at first glance seems liberating is actually frightening beyond description. Murder, rape, child abuse, and genocide are not truly wrong or evil, because there are no absolutes. In fact, these things are on the same plane as acts of generosity, kindness, and love because there is no ethical standard to distinguish between good and evil. No one can say that we ought to live and act in a certain way because there is no basis for “oughtness” anywhere. You may say you are “free to do what you want any old time,” but so is the next person, and he may want to torture and murder you. You may not like torture or murder, but they are not objectively wrong or evil, because there are no absolutes.

Truth

Or consider the concepts of truth and knowledge. Since all truth is relative, we are told we can have “truths” but no “Truth” with a capital “T.” Knowledge is always tentative and uncertain. But are you certain about that? If so, you are holding an absolute your system denies. More importantly, you have embraced a position in which you can know nothing and say nothing for certain. Do you know that you exist? Do you know that the letter “A” is not the same as the letter “B”? Do you know that any statement about anything has any validity? You don’t if there are no absolutes. So knowledge and truth slip through your fingers like the wind. Your thought processes and propositional statements about anything (including truth and knowledge) are utter nonsense. The only logical consequence is silence or babble. Anything beyond these is actually pure arrogance because you have set yourself up as an arbitrary absolute. Without realizing it, you have made yourself the ultimate reference point of all reality. There is no absolute truth except what you say!

Meaning

Lastly, consider the area of the meaning and purpose of life. To say that there are no absolutes is to say that there is no *absolute* meaning or purpose to life. This leads (if one is consistent and honest) to the conclusion that there is no meaning or purpose to life at all. You may say that you can create your own meaning, but if there is no *ultimate* meaning to life, you are just deceiving yourself. If your origin is meaningless and your destiny is meaningless, your present existence is also meaningless, and any attempt to somehow manufacture meaning from meaninglessness is ut-

ter futility.

Suppose you take the position of trying to find meaning and purpose in the preservation and betterment of the human species or of the earth. Remember there are no absolutes, so these “noble” goals have no real purpose or meaning or value. What does it matter if you or the human race or the universe itself continues for one more moment? The answer is, “Nothing!” It matters nothing because nothing matters in a universe that has no absolute meaning or purpose. You are a point in time playing a pointless role in a meaningless existence without a plot. As Shakespeare’s Macbeth puts it, life is “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Without absolutes in the area of meaning and purpose, life is absurd. Insanity or suicide makes as much sense as anything, because nothing makes sense.

So what have we come to in this renunciation of absolutes? We have truths that are not true, purposes that have no purpose, values that have no value, and life that has no meaning. Even rational discourse is negated. To renounce absolutes is to renounce everything and end with nothing. *Absolutely* nothing.

The Ultimate Absolute

But, are there no absolutes? Yes, there are, and deep down everyone knows it. Each of us knows that there is a real difference between cruelty and non-cruelty. We know that murder, rape, and child abuse are wrong. We know that we know some things for certain. For instance, we know that we exist as self-conscious individuals and that our existence must have meaning and value. According to the Bible, God has written His absolutes on the human heart. (Romans 1:18-32; 2:14-16) Our problem is that in seeking autonomous moral freedom (“I’m free to do what I want.”), we have suppressed this inescapable knowledge of right and wrong and have sought to live without reference to the One Ultimate Absolute that is the basis of all others. If you do not begin with the infinite-personal God who has communicated to us in the Bible, it is impossible logically to have any absolutes. As one philosopher said, “No finite point has meaning without an infinite reference point.”

It comes down to this. If you don’t start with God, the ultimate absolute, you end with nothing: Nothing in the area of morality, nothing in the area of meaning, nothing in the area of knowledge. You may say, “I still have freedom.” Yes, but what a terrible freedom: Freedom to be nothing, to know nothing, to live for nothing. The more consistently you try to live out this so-called “freedom,” the more bondage to sin, despair, and futility you will experience.

There are absolutes and you can know them because God has spoken. But far more importantly, you can know God because of what He has done in sending His Son into the world. This is where real freedom is found. As Jesus told those who followed Him, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:31-32)

True faith in Christ is diametrically opposed to any form of oppressive absolutism, whether it is the secular absolutism of a Hitler or a Mao, or the religious absolutism of the Crusades or the Inquisition. Christ spoke strongly against such things as arrogance, oppressive intolerance, self-righteousness, and judgmentalism.