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# Relativism and Christian Theology

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The relativism of our present age is nothing new. In fact, human understanding has always been relative and perspectival in spite of our naive beliefs to the contrary. What is unique today is that great numbers of human beings have become aware of the fact that our understanding of the world is not objective but seen through the filter of our understanding. It would seem that among the last to accept this truth are Christians who cling to an antiquated realism in the belief that it is essential to Christianity. Such a belief, however, is no more essential to Christianity than

was the belief of many early modern Christians that the universe was geocentric. Furthermore, not only is such a realist view less than true, it is also less conducive to the spirit of Christianity than a perspectival, relativist view of reality.

Since the time of Kant it has been generally accepted that our understanding of the world is always mediated by concepts that are in us and not part of the world. Of course, Kant tried to salvage the idea of universal knowledge in spite of our not being able to know objective reality or things-in-themselves. The Kantian solution was that what the individual brought to the experience, and what was therefore not part of the world as given, were ideas that existed as universal mental hardware which, although not part of the world itself, are part of the way all human beings conceptualize and think about the world.

After Kant, however, a host of philosophers as diverse as Hegel, Nietzsche, James, Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and Foucault, just to mention a few, argued that much of what

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Kant thought to be innate hardware was, in fact, the product of history, culture, language communities, and the philosophical perspectives and values of individual human beings. Of course, there remains another camp of philosophers who have retained something of a Kantian claim that what we bring to our experience of the world is more a matter of innate hardware. There is certainly some truth to their claim and we do have a degree of hardware which allows us to process our experience of the world. Mixed with that hardware, however, is imagination, and it is largely because of a freedom in the imagination that our understanding changes with history, culture, and language communities.

It may not appear that imagination is at the root of our conceptual understanding of the world since most concepts which play such a big part in making up our understanding are dictatorially imposed upon us when we are very young. In our initial acquisition of language, we are given the concepts of our language, community and culture. In the early stages of that acquisition, however, we did have concepts that were not 'given' but rather were the product of our own experience and imagination. In fact, the concepts we received from our language community were generally corrections to those initial concepts.

The initial concepts we formed were those based on a limited number of instances and often did not much resemble the concepts of our language community. Our initial concept of a dog may have been that

of a four-legged sock-eater, but as we experienced more instances signified by the same signifier or word, *dog*, our concept changed, and came ever closer to reflect the concept of our language community. Not all instances to which the signifier, *dog* was attached were sock-eaters and there were many more things that had four legs than were signified by the word, *dog*. Our concept of dog changed to accommodate the instances signified by other speakers of our language community. If we had been presented with a different set of instances, it would have produced a different concept within us.

Most of our concepts have been dictatorially imposed upon us in just such a way. Prior to that imposition, however, we were forming concepts out of our imagination. Later in life, some of us become philosophers, and that imagination again becomes a major source of many of the concepts we come to form.

Of course, the concepts of young children and philosophers aside, most of our concepts are not the product of our imagination, but are imposed upon us as we adapt to the concepts of our language communities. But even those concepts ultimately had their origin in the imagination of some individual or individuals whose concepts eventually came to be accepted and to represent the concepts of an entire cultural, historical epoch, or language community. So the understanding that human beings have of the world is made up of a strange mix of raw sensations, innate hardware, and the imagination.

It is, of course, the imaginative element that is the main contributor to relativism. Although Einstein proved the relativity of simultaneity by showing that even our experience of raw sense data is relative to our perspective, and no perspectival position in the universe can be privileged over another, the main source of relativism is certainly the imagination. Since concepts are not simply given in experience but are a combination of raw experience combined with judgments concerning how that raw experience is to be organized and thus understood, imagination plays a large role in our understanding of the world.

Because the imagination is to a great extent free, we can imagine that there are different racial kinds of people or we can imagine that there is only one human race. We can imagine sets of symptoms as a single disease or several different diseases. It is out of our imagination that we divide up the world and create our understanding. That does not mean, however, that the divisions we make are not based upon what we actually experience. It is rather that what we actually experience affords us more bases for dividing up the world than we could ever use. Hence, we must make choices concerning where to make our divisions and form our concepts. Consequently, our conceptualization of what we experience is largely supplied by our imagination and is therefore relative and perspectival rather than objective and universal.

What is necessary to overcome relativism is not that we all have the

same basic understanding, because we all adhere to the same conventions. That would merely produce the illusion of realism. What is necessary is some God-given means to limit the freedom in our imagination. Medieval Aristotelians believed that we did have such a God-given means in the form of a mental hardware or active intellect that caused our conceptual understanding to be formed in a God-prescribed way. If this were the case then we would all form not only similar concepts, but correct, or God-given, similar concepts. Of course, such a view is difficult to maintain today in the light of what we know about the way our understanding of the world changes due to history, culture, and philosophy.

Additionally, in the twentieth century, we have become aware of the structural nature of our understanding. The great contribution of structuralism, and what even post-structuralists retain from structuralism, is the fact that language constitutes a web of meaning. The meaning of one word effects another, and no word stands as an atomistic entity whose meaning is self contained and independent from other words. This further adds to the relative nature of our understanding, for as the meaning of one word changes due to cultural, historical, or philosophical factors, so does the meaning of other words.

In light of all this, can we believe that there is a correct conceptual understanding, or a God's-eye-view to which we might have access? The answer to such a question depends upon what we mean by a God's-eye-

view. If we mean that our understanding of the world can be something like mathematics which all human beings have access to merely by being human, and whose content is objective and universal, then the answer is certainly, no. If, however, we mean by a God's-eye-view that we are able to enter into a personal and intimate relationship with a God who desires to reveal his perspectival understanding in order that we might become ever more like him, then the answer is certainly, yes.

The Enlightenment science of modernity sought an objective and universal understanding. Christians of the modern era followed that dominant view and fashioned their understanding of God after such a model. Moderns supposed that since mathematics is not perspectival but objective in a way that other ways of knowing are not, it would give us an ideal form of knowing. The integral calculus developed by moderns like Newton and Leibniz allowed such an objective way of knowing to be mapped to our ideas of the external world and thus gave us the notion that such a world did not need to be subjective and perspectival.

Certainly there is merit to this and we would not want to do without a mathematical physics and all the benefits it brings. The problem arises when we suppose that it is the best and, in fact, the only model for true knowledge. The problem with modernity was not just that it offered a mathematical model for knowledge, but it insisted that all knowledge be objective and universal. God, however, never intended to be

known with objective certainty. To know God in an objective and universal way may bring us into religion but not faith.

If we are to come to faith, our overcoming of relativism will not be by getting to some objective reality but by getting to a perspectival God's-eye-view through a personal and ongoing dialogue with God. The reason we need to get to a God's-eye-view through a personal dialogue is because God is a person and, like any person, God is a mystery that cannot be discovered but must be revealed.

Whenever we wish to know someone in more than a casual way, we are faced with a mystery which we cannot penetrate. Another's innermost thoughts and desires are not accessible to us and therefore appear mysterious. But although we do not have access to the mysteries which lie within another person, they can reveal those mysteries to us. Hence, the mystery of a person is not an unknowable mystery, so long as the person we wish to know both understands the mysterious depths of her own being, and is willing to reveal those mysterious depths to us. Fortunately, God is a person who both knows himself and is willing to make himself known. Thus, although a mystery, God is a mystery that is knowable. In fact, God is a mystery that is infinitely knowable.

Relativism is therefore overcome, not by getting to some ultimate, objective reality but by getting to some ultimate perspective. We come to that perspective through a series of revelations which constitute an ongoing

ing dialogue. Whether the revelations by which we come to know God take the form of a written or spoken word, a vision or small still voice is of little consequence. What is essential to the nature of the revelation is that it is both ongoing and dialogic. One revelation, or even a dozen, no matter how spectacular, will not bring us very far into an understanding of who God is. The revelations must constitute a continuing series by which our understanding and intimacy increases. In order for such growth to occur, the nature of the revelation must also be dialogic.

The form of this dialogue is not unlike the way we personally communicate to other human beings whom we wish to know evermore intimately. In the Scripture, God's relationship with us is likened to a husband's relationship to a wife (e.g., the fifth chapter of Ephesians, the book of Hosea, the Song of Songs, et al.). In the relationship between spouses, if there is an interest to know the depths of the other person, it will always begin as a mystery. With patience and an ongoing dialogue through which the other person reveals himself, however, understanding and intimacy begin to develop.

Of course, it is not enough that the person reveals herself. If the revelation is to be ongoing and dialogic, the other person in the dialogue must participate. That does not mean that we necessarily need to speak back to God. God knows our hearts so it is not necessary that we speak, but we must participate in the revelation and respond by formulating the next question in order that

the dialogue may continue. Every revelation must bring us to a still deeper question.

With human beings some questions may be considered too delicate to ask for fear that such questions might end the relationship, but in not asking the question, we end the dialogue and our understanding of the other person goes no further. With God, we need not have such a fear so long as the next question we formulate is for the purpose of knowing him better and coming into a greater intimacy with him.

Of course, we must also be willing to accept the answer that, at the present time, God cannot reveal an answer to a particular question. There may be many reasons for this, but one certainly is that we do not know enough about God at the present time and would thus misunderstand what was revealed to us. I am very grateful that God did not reveal certain things to me until I had enough understanding to handle them. Indeed, many things that God reveals to us after a thirty-year journey with him, could not have been properly understood after two years or even ten. This is the nature of any ongoing dialogue with anyone but it is especially true of our relationship with God.

In spite of the fact that God, or any other person with whom we are in intimate dialogue, is able to reveal their unique perspective to us, it would, nevertheless, be an error to think that such a revelation gives us a comprehensive understanding of that other person. We may have particular insights, but much of that oth-

er person will always be a mystery to us. The great error in Christian theology is to either believe that God is not knowable on a personal and intimate level, or to believe that God is completely knowable. Our understanding of God, like our understanding of anyone with whom we are intimate, is both something we grasp and something which escapes us.

Furthermore, the nature of the understanding we gain concerning God, or any other person, is not an objective knowing. It will always be perspectival and therefore relative to our present understanding of that person. This is especially true of God. Indeed, when God speaks to us, either through a spoken or written word, a vision, or an inner witness, we have to interpret what God is attempting to communicate, and that interpretation is not only influenced by where we are in our ongoing dialogue with God, but by a host of other factors as well. Certainly what God communicates to us is 'the given,' but the meaning we attribute to it is always relative to our historical, cultural, and philosophical understanding.

Additionally, our understanding of God is also structural and exists within a web of meaning and therefore our understanding will be relative to that web. If my idea of love changes, so does my idea of God. The same is true of a host of other concepts such as faith, forgiveness, sin, holiness, repentance, etc. Any change in those concepts will affect my concept of God as well.

In spite of all these factors which

make our understanding of God perspectival and relative, our understanding is not relative in the sense that we can think anything we want. If we truly are in an ongoing dialogue, there is an anchor which prevents us from drifting here and there. Just as the external world of sense data provides an anchor for our understanding of the physical world, the other person in a dialogue provides an anchor which keeps us from thinking anything we want about that person. If fact, it is much more of an anchor than the sense data of the physical world. With the sense data that the world provides, we are at great liberty to conceptualize that data, not in any way we want, but in a great variety of ways.

Such freedom is more limited in a dialogue that seeks to know another person in that the other person prevents us from believing a vast variety of false assumptions. If the other person is knowledgeable, trustworthy, and open, our understanding of them, as perspectival as it may be, will be constantly kept in check and not allowed to drift too far from the reality of that other person. Thus, although the thing we seek knowledge of is not an object but a subject, and thus our knowledge will be subjective rather than objective, we cannot think anything we want. There is something or someone to whom our knowledge is attached. So our understanding is not wildly relative, so long as we stay in an ongoing dialogue through which the other person continually corrects the understanding we have of them.

Additionally, when this ongoing

dialogue is with the person of God, it also provides us with a knowledge that is certain. Of course, the certainty we have concerning our knowledge of God is unlike the objective certainty of mathematics. Indeed, the certainty we acquire through our ongoing dialogue with God is a subjective certainty concerning God's faithfulness. Such subjective certainty is the kind that develops slowly over time as another person consistently demonstrates their faithfulness. As such faithfulness is demonstrated, we become evermore certain of that other person and their faithfulness.

This kind of subjective certainty differs greatly from the kind of certainty insisted upon by mathematics. For one thing, it is not the kind of certainty which we can demonstrate or pass on to other people, for even when God repeatedly shows himself faithful, and we get the personal assurance that God can be explicitly trusted, it is not the kind of certainty we can demonstrate to others as we can with mathematics. With God we must let everyone come to that certainty through their own personal encounter and journey with God.

### CONCLUSION

This kind of subjective, relative, yet certain understanding of God is not only different from the objective and universal understanding that theologians had attempted to set forth in the past, but it is also more conducive to the spirit of Christianity. To begin with, it produces an invaluable humility in us. With the view we have been suggesting, whatever our theol-

ogy is, it is never the last word. Our understanding of God is always ongoing and therefore always perspectival and less than stable. Of course, what we desire is stability, and a theology which purports to be objective and universal gives us the security we desire. Such security, however, is in ourselves and our well crafted theology rather than God. Such a theology puts us in charge, while a theology based on an ongoing dialogue through which God reveals himself puts God in charge and reduces us to a proper place of humility and dependence.

The consequence of such humility and dependence is that it causes us to draw near to God and seek his wisdom rather than simply applying standard theological solutions to the situations we find ourselves in. Admittedly, that is uncomfortable, and we would all prefer to have been equipped with a better knowledge of God in order that we could serve him out of our own knowledge and wisdom rather than out of a dependence upon him. But, of course, such a dependent relationship is the very essence of Christianity.

Certainly, God could have equipped us with an ability to conceptualize as he does and make wise judgments out of that understanding, but the fact that God chose not to do that tells us that he has something better for us. What God has for us is to personally lead us with his wisdom. Indeed, God chose to retain true knowledge for himself and dispense wisdom as individuals sought his counsel. This is a central theme of the gospel. Jesus commands us to



follow him, to live as he lived. The way he lived was to be in constant communion with the father, and to do nothing out of his own wisdom.

The Son can do nothing by himself, he can only do what he sees his Father doing because whatever the Father does the Son also does. (John 5:19 NIV)

Or as he says later in John's Gospel,

The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. (John 14:10 NIV)

It is God's desire that we would all live in such close relationship with him that it would be his wisdom rather than our own that would lead us through this life. Thus, we do have access to true wisdom, but it is not through objective methods like those of mathematics and science but through a personal relationship with a living God. This is why, in both the third chapter of James' Epistle and the second and third chapters of 1st Corinthians, we are told that there are two wisdoms. One is a wisdom that 'does not come down from heaven but is earthly . . . (James 3:15),' and another wisdom that does come from heaven (James 3:17). If our theology is to be based on a wisdom that comes down from heaven, it will require a theology rooted in a personal and intimate dialogue with God and not in the narrow and exacting doctrines of a theological system.

Finally, it will be only through such a dialogue and the subjective and perspectively relative theology it produces that the unity God intends for his people will come about. Indeed, what has kept Christians apart for so long has been our belief

that we possess an objective and universal theology. Once constructed, such an objective theology causes us to see others who have reasoned up a different theology as either rationally or spiritually deficient. In the past, Christians have killed each other over rather minor doctrinal points because they believed they were in possession of an objective and universal truth.

Such a position is not possible if we believe that an understanding of who God is comes through dialogue which is personal, intimate, and ongoing. With such a view, it is easy to understand how others can be in a different place in the journey which is the Christian life. Indeed, the same Scripture and the same God have different meanings to a seven-year-old who has just encountered God, and to one who has been on the journey with God for fifty years. True, the seven-year-old can experience God every bit as much as the mature Christian, but the understanding and the meaning attributed to that experience will certainly be different. What should be the greatest difference between the two is that the new believer is tempered to think that his/her understanding is complete, while the mature believer should be reluctant to draw such conclusions. Unfortunately, this is not always the case and often the older Christian has not mellowed but has become more rigid. Ideas of God have narrowed rather than broadened, and doctrines are ever more exacting. I would suggest that such a theology is the product of the ego's desire for objective certainty rather than gen-

uine communion with God.

It is very different with the mature believer whose wisdom and theology have come out of an ongoing dialogic journey with God. Such a believer is more likely to embrace what a colleague of mine refers to as 'humble hermeneutics'. Such 'humble

hermeneutics' result from a reduced confidence in our own understanding and alone makes possible the kind of unity God desires for his church. That is, a unity established upon the recognition of other human beings engaged in the mysterious dialogue which is the Christian life.

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