

# ***RELATIVELY SPEAKING***

*The Philosophy of Individualism*

Number 29

Editor: Gordon F. Brown, Ph.D.

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**GREETINGS!** Welcome to the 70 new sign-ups from last semester. Here is an update for you regulars. I am making progress on the Relativity book—I have reorganized the chapter several of you said was awkward to read. On the legal front, last month, the California Supreme Court refused to review my lawsuit. This was not unexpected—very few cases are granted review. I will summarize the arguments in the next newsletter. Regarding the current newsletter focus, whether I listen to students or read the *Wall Street Journal*, the topic of religion seems to be of increasing interest. As I see it, the relative approach to religion can make a significant contribution to this dialogue. As noted in the last newsletter, the next few newsletters will address the issue of applying the relative perspective to the Christian and Judaic religions. —

**JUST FOR FUN:** Six excerpts from Spring '97 end-of semester student “Response Forms.”

*The class was very helpful and insightful...motivated you to do your work because you were in control of your grade...difficult at times because we are not typically accustomed to this type of teaching format...enjoyed the class immensely and truly appreciated the relative model—it opened up a world of thought.*

*I found this class a challenge in many aspects...Dr. Brown's style was very difficult for me to accept and learn with in the beginning...after two months or so, I began enjoying the discussion of ideas without emotional ties to the arguments.*

*I had never been exposed to a class like this...I enjoyed it very much...when my husband talked about the ideas that you talked about in class, I used to think he was crazy, now I'm able to understand what he is talking about.*

*Even though I only received a “C” in this Psych I class, I feel I have acquired better studying and listening skills than during all of my four years in high school.*

*This class redefined what I thought was “thinking.”*

*I enjoyed the fact that some of my ideas were challenged...This class made me think about things differently...I don't think I'll change my ideas, but it has given me “food for thought.”*

## **MAKING SENSE OUT OF LIVING—and Religion**

What are we doing with our lives? One beginning point is to say that we are seeking security. Whether we observe the squirrel gathering acorns or people accumulating wealth, we are all working to increase our sense of security.

Consider that throughout history people have used some form of religion to maximize their sense of security. As a matter of personal and individual commitment, there appears to be considerable

persistence and spontaneous renewal in this approach. However, as for the organized establishments of religion (churches, sects, and national commitments), the story is inundated with wars, intolerance, divisiveness, and a sense of low individual self worth.

What people seem to have always wanted is a religion based on a personal relationship between God and the individual. In contrast to what they were seeking, organized religions (“churches”) appear to generally place the church organization itself between God and the individual. Thus, while people were seeking a church that would guide them to a personal relationship, what they got was a church that required subservience to the church’s own rituals and dogmas. Ironically, membership in a church generally required giving up the quest for a personal relationship with God. The story of people and their churches can be described as a tale of unabated confusion and distress.

What about the future? I predict that during the next 20 years, there will be a noticeable trend toward a personalization of religious practices. Churches will become more relative in orientation, with an increased emphasis on providing service rather than extracting servitude. This change from absolute to relative perceptions of religion will introduce a revolutionary change in our society. Fundamental sources of insurmountable confusion and frustration will be greatly reduced—the effect will be as significant as would be the discovery and popular acceptance of a pollution-free automobile. As a social phenomenon, this change will affect everyone regardless of their views on religion.

## **RELIGION AND RELATIVITY**

As I see it, some form of religion is required to make life intelligible. To be intelligible, such a religion, if it assumes the existence of what is generally referred to as God or The Force, would necessarily be based on a premise of a personal and individual relationship with that God or Force. Of course, this view is based on several assumptions, but these assumptions are more warranted than any other assumptions required to take their place—at least as I see it.

A general context connecting relativity and religion can be made as follows. “Relativity” is the term most reasonably used to describe an approach which is based on personal relationships—relativity or relationships, it is the same thing. I cannot know you, but I can know what I experience when I am with you. That is, I can know relationships but I cannot know the individual participants. Expanding the idea of relativity to a philosophy simply refers to the assumption that relationships are the basic building blocks for organizing all human experience. Such a relative approach can be contrasted with an absolute approach where known Truths are assumed to be the basic building blocks for organizing human experience. I can know what you are independently of me. The relative and absolute approaches are contradictory—one logically excludes the other. To mix the two approaches is to create an unintelligible and fragmented view of one’s personal experience. As for religion, to assume a personal relationship as the basic link between God and the individual is to describe a “relative” approach to religion. This is a topic that interests me.

Even though my experiences include walking down the path with a Buddhist monk in Thailand, my primary exposure has been to the Protestant, Bible-oriented Christian religion as interpreted

## **RELIGION AND RELATIVITY** (Continued)

from an absolute perspective. Over time, it became clear to me that the Bible could be interpreted from either an absolute or relative perspective, and a distinction could be made between the religion of Jesus (relative) versus the religion about Jesus (absolute).

It is this distinction, between absolute and relative approaches to religion, that I believe will be the focus of world-class debate during the next 20 years. Whether the discussion involves international conflicts in the Middle East, Bosnia, or Ireland; or domestic conflicts over abortion, sexual orientation, or assisted death; the critical determiner will be whether the individual participants hold absolute or relative belief systems. The fundamental issues can be grasped as easily by the 17-year-old as the 77-year-old—each having peculiar advantages and disadvantages.

There are two points here. First, embracing the relative perspective does not mean giving up your religion, particularly if it happens to be Bible-oriented Christianity. On the contrary, the relative perspective may provide the opportunity to appreciate, for the first time, the power of ideas that have been sustained for thousands of years. The second point is that regardless of your religious orientation (or lack thereof), the debate over absolute versus relative religious values will affect society as a whole and you as an individual—the two perspectives are contradictory and our social structure will be significantly affected by the outcome. Personal security can be enhanced by a relative approach to religion, and social security can be enhanced by being familiar with both approaches in order to deal with the contradictory social demands as the debate remains unresolved.

In the next few newsletters, I will point out some statements in the Bible that can be interpreted from a relative perspective and contrary to the absolute perspective. Whether the interpretation is consistent with a relative or absolute perspective will be up to you (that criterion, “up to you,” itself is a relative assumption). If you agree that the Bible—both the old and new testaments, separately and collectively—is consistent with a relative perspective, then the conclusions arrived at would seemingly apply to Judaism as well as to Christianity (at least to the extent that they claim to be consistent with the Old and/or New Testaments of the Bible).

It is with some hesitation that I approach the discussion of religion. Most people, whether they are subscribers to religious beliefs or not, seem to view religion only from absolute perspectives. Given our cultural bias toward absolute thinking, to present a relative approach to religion is a formidable undertaking. Even on secular topics, changing over from an absolute to a relative perspective is difficult if not seemingly impossible. Those of you who were first introduced to relative thinking in my classes know the frustration associated with changing intellectually from an absolute to a relative perspective regarding science. I suspect the challenge is even greater when the change involves beliefs relating to religion. I will particularly welcome your comments on this topic.

<p>If you would be interested in a summer get-together, let me know by leaving a message at (818) 578-7498. Perhaps we can discuss the relative approach to religion. Suggest a time. Saturday morning from 9:30 to 11:00 A.M.?</p>
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**RELATIVIST’S QUOTE OF THE MONTH:**

*“A thought is often original, though you have uttered it a hundred times.”*

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

**“TALK BACK”**

From K. P. in New York, New York

*“I enjoyed reading the newsletter. Please update my address.”*

From J. J. in Los Angeles, CA

*“Looking back it is hard to believe it has been 4 years since taking your class. I found it to be one of the most interesting and favorable classes I’ve taken. It is the only course I can truly say I read the book ‘cover to cover.’ Thanks for all your insight.”*

From L.C. in Alhambra, CA

*“I really enjoy all the newsletters you send and want to thank you for them...I not only read them in their entirety every time, but lend them out to various people who have shown an interest...my sister will be taking your class in Spring ’97...she seems to see things in the relative as I like to think I do.”*

From E.D. in Pasadena, CA

*“Thank you for the newsletter—especially the section on Relativist’s Quotes of the Month...It came at a very good time. The quote helped me to appreciate and extract great lessons from bad situations.”*

**ADDRESS CHECK:**

For the 70 new sign-ups from last semester: I will send a few newsletters. If you would like to continue receiving them, verify your address and interest by simply calling or writing as described below.

For you old-timers: Labeling is a continuing process. If you do not have a \*95 (or later) on your mailing label and you would like to continue receiving the newsletter, confirm your address and interest by sending a note to: School of Communication, PO BOX 1211, Arcadia, CA 91077. [Or using the “Contact Us” feature on the SOC website.]