

RELATIVELY SPEAKING

The Philosophy of Individualism

Number 30

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GREETINGS! Excuse me! In the last newsletter, the phone number that I provided for indicating an interest in a summer get-together was an old PCC number from many years ago. I have installed a separate phone line at home for fax/computer use, and I will use it also for future newsletter communications—(626) 445-1749.

The newsletter list now contains over 800 names. A convenient number is 200, and that is about the number who have kept their addresses and interest current. I will be dropping about 100 per mailing in order to cull out those who have not indicated an interest in continuing to receive them. If you do not have *95 or later on your mailing label address, and you would like to continue receiving the newsletter, call the above number and so state; or send a brief written message to the SOC mailbox address.

In this issue: I begin the series *Christianity and Relativity*; Shelby Steele's book, *The Content of Our Character* is reviewed; Senator Moynihan provides the *Quote of the Month*; and several of you provide the *Talk Back* comments.

Christianity and Relativity—Validating Our Experiences

To begin, here is a brief note about the relative perspective—as I see it. Fundamental to the relative approach is the contention that human experience is always an individual matter and always involves interactions or relationships. As for Christianity, while any religion could be looked at from a relative perspective, I have chosen Christianity simply for reasons of familiarity and my belief that the Bible is substantially relative in its message. For convenience, I will define “Christianity” as a religion based on the Bible. This definition will establish the Bible as a common referent for discussing a relative approach to Christianity.

Relatively speaking, the basic belief upon which all else is built is a relationship—a personal and private relationship between the individual and God. While any experience can provide food for thought, the significance of any idea would be established within that personal and private relationship with God.

In contrast, the absolutist will build his/her religion upon what are assumed to be absolute Truths. These Truths are frequently provided from a written source such as the Bible and/or a personal source such as a minister ordained by an organized church.

Also in contrast to the relative position is the mixed position. However, here the basic foundation for building a belief system is an emotional sense of feeling good. This sense of feeling good is frequently sought through bonding-type communications with friends and/or family. The name of God is appended to the process simply because it feels good to do so.

Validating Our Experiences (Continued)

For each of us, our reliance upon personal conviction, authorities, or friends becomes our primary referent around which our daily experiences are interpreted and integrated. Such a primary referent will illuminate the path which we will travel and will provide the means for perceiving and resolving our conflicts. The primary distinguishing characteristic of the relative approach is that it relies upon a personal and private relationship between God and the individual—we have neither priests nor ministers to mediate, and neither friends nor family to provide support.

Where do each of us stand on this matter of choosing a primary referent? We can observe what we do when faced with daily difficulties and critical decision-making opportunities. The mixed will seek out the company of close friends and family members for emotional support and that sense of security achieved through unconditional acceptance. The absolutist will seek answers from an authority such as a priest or passages from the Bible. In contrast, the relativist will seek solitude with thoughts directed toward a God whose presence is sensed—a time of sharing one's thoughts in a private one-on-one interaction.

The Bible can provide support for any or all of these three approaches. It is the individual who decides which approach (or combination of approaches) is going to be relied upon—relative, absolute, or mixed. In this current series of newsletters, consideration is given to the idea that the relative approach, and only the relative approach, is intelligible. The absolute and mixed approaches can be seen as defying reason and personal experience. Furthermore, it will be the contention of these newsletters that the Bible substantially supports a relative approach and rejects both the absolute and mixed approaches.

Looking to the Bible and viewing it from the relative perspective, we can begin with the reference provide by “L. C.” and cited in the *Talk-Back* section: “seek, and you will find” (Luke 11:9; Matt. 7:7). Consistent with the relative approach, developing a relationship with God begins with a decision by the individual to seek.

Next, we can ask what is being sought. “But seek first his [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (Matt. 6:33; Luke 12:31). If this passage means to seek a relationship with God as one’s top priority, under which all else is subsumed, then the statement supports the relative approach with its emphasis on individual choice—it is the individual who chooses to seek a personal relationship with God.

Given that an individual chooses to seek a relationship with God, we can now look for a reference describing this relationship as private and personal. And, here it is in a statement attributed to Jesus: “...when you pray, go into your room and shut the door...” (Matt. 6:6).

Taken together, these references support a relative perspective. That is, it is the individual, rather than the group or inspired prophets, who is responsible for human decision making. Whereas the relativist relies on his/her own individual decision making (and God) for final validation, both the absolutist and the mixed tend to rely upon group consensus (and God) for validation. Just as the song for the absolutist could be *Onward Christian Soldiers*, the song for the relativist could

Validating Our Experiences (Continued)

be *I Walk Through the Garden Alone*. The mixed could sing both songs enthusiastically simply because they are both emotionally arousing. The issue here is one of validation—and it is this issue of validation upon which all other issues are rooted. The point here is that the primary focus from the relative approach to religion, and particularly Christianity, is spending time alone and directing one’s personal thoughts to an ever-present Force.

[In future newsletters, I will cite specific relative statements from the Bible, review the role of Jesus, and comment on the nature of relationships. I welcome your comments.]

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BOOK REVIEW—As I See It

The Content of Our Character by Shelby Steele (1990)

The Wall Street Journal says, “One of the best books on race in America to appear in the past 25 years.” George Will of *Newsweek* magazine says, “If you read no other book...make it Shelby Steele’s *The Content of Our Character*.”

Steele addresses character issues such as power, guilt, backlash, and innocence. The focus is on black versus white race relations particularly as viewed from the black middle class perspective. A professor of English at San Jose State University in California, who identifies himself as black and middle class, Steele argues that personal, social, and economic advancement for members of the black race is going to be primarily the result of skill development and not preferential treatment, and more a matter of individual effort than group effort. In the past, he argues, group efforts opened the door to opportunity. Advancing from this point is primarily a matter of walking through that door—a task which can only be achieved by individual determination.

I particularly enjoyed reading this book (last month). Steele’s emphasis on “individual initiative, self-interested hard work, individual responsibility, delayed gratification...” for achieving personal satisfaction and social economic advancement parallel that of my own views. I could identify with his references to existential writers such as Sartre and Kafka, and with their emphasis on individual decision making as creating the foundation for human experience. Adding to the book’s readability were Steele’s accounts of his personal experiences as when, the summer before he left for college, he heard Martin Luther King speak in Chicago. King “laid it on the line for black students everywhere: ‘When you are behind in a footrace, the only way to get ahead is to run faster than the man in front of you. So when your white roommate says he’s tired and goes to sleep, you stay up and burn the midnight oil.’” Although Steele primarily addresses issues relating to black and white race relations, his conceptual organizations are basic and applicable to a wide range of situations where “managing differences” is at issue—as in communications among friends or family members.

Book Review (Continued)

For me, Steele's book was refreshingly clear and engaging. Only regarding the means of changing behavior would I suggest a different emphasis. Where Steele seems to emphasize family support to bring about change, I am becoming increasingly convinced that some form of relative religion is essential to any fundamental change in human behavior. I can point out that Martin Luther King was, after all, a minister, and his public statements make it clear to me that his faith was founded on an on-going personal experience (relative) rather than commitment to some system of assumed Truths (absolute). "I have a dream" is classic relativity!

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RELATIVIST'S QUOTE OF THE MONTH:

"I hope there is a God, and I believe there is a God. Knowing is beyond human capacity—took a little while [for me] to figure that out. I've been helped a lot by Reinhold Niebuhr, who made the most sense to me as a theologian in our times, and Andrew Greeley, who is a friend and a Catholic priest."

New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan
Talking with David Frost, March 28, 1997

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"TALK BACK"

From K. R. in Los Angeles, CA

"Hello! It is always nice to hear from you. I love the newsletter. Please confirm my interest in the newsletter...."

From W. P. in Solvang, CA

"Thanks for the recent "Relatively Speaking"...I enjoyed reading it... We moved...."

From L. C. in Newcastle, CA

"I continue to enjoy your newsletters...Four years since I left PCC...very interested in your latest subject matter—religion...I have struggled...finally evolved into a state of mind that works for me...It's a personal interpretation [achieved] through active seeking...I guess I epitomize...relative Christianity...To quote Christ himself, 'Seek and you shall find'...He didn't say, 'sit down, shut-up, listen and accept, no questions asked'... Good luck with your book project."

TALK BACK (Continued)

From D. L. in San Gabriel, CA

“Please continue to send me the newsletters...Thanks!”

From G. M. in San Marino, CA

“Please continue your letters to me. Thanks.”

From T. B. in Arcadia, CA

“I’d definitely like to continue receiving the newsletters. It has helped me immeasurably in my relationships with others. Class of Fall, 1986!”