

Relativism is a Mask

Part 6 of a Register Series

by Edward Sri

“So, Dr. Sri, do you think I’m a relativist?” That was the odd question posed to me many years ago at a Catholic convention in the New York City area. I had just finished giving a presentation on moral relativism when an energetic young man chased me down to ask his unusual personal question. “Your talk got me wondering if maybe I’m a relativist. What do you think?”

“Well, I don’t really know you,” I replied. “But you’re here at this Catholic conference. Are you a practicing Catholic?” “Yes, I’m Catholic,” he said. “I go to Mass, I go to Eucharistic adoration, and I love going to conferences like this one.” “Good. What about moral issues? Let’s take a big one today — do you think abortion is wrong?” “Oh yes, abortion is definitely wrong ... for me.” There were those two small words — “for me.” They sent up a red flag in my mind.

“What do you mean by saying it’s wrong for you? Don’t you think abortion is wrong for everyone?” I asked. “Well, I’m against abortion,” he said. “But that’s my truth. If someone else thinks abortion is okay, that’s their truth. So, for them, it would be okay.”

His answer made one thing very clear, and I told him so: “You are a relativist if you think that!” We then debated whether the baby in the womb is a baby in reality or just in his own personal opinion. But that did not get very far. The young man kept saying that “for him” the baby was a human life, but for others it might not be. So I tried a different approach.

We were at a conference center in Newark, New Jersey, standing in a grand hallway with large windows looking out across the Hudson River toward Manhattan. It was only a couple of years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. I pointed out the window and asked him, “Are you really that much of a relativist? Look out there! Just a few years ago, there were two towers standing there in Lower Manhattan, and terrorists flew airplanes into those buildings. Thousands of people died that day. Are you willing to go up to the kids who lost a parent in the World Trade Center, look them in the eye and tell them that what the terrorists did was not wrong, because ‘for them’ they thought they were doing good? Could you really do that?”

He was startled by this scenario and nervously said, “Wow ... that’s very personal. I lost friends in the towers that day. Oh, wow. ... That would be really hard ...” He continued, talking about what a horrible day 9/11 was. “It would be very difficult to do that. ... But, if I had to be honest ... yes, I’d have to tell those kids that, for the terrorists, what they did was not wrong.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I needed a big “Plan B.” In dismay, I replied, “I don’t know what more I could say to you. But you said you love Jesus in the Eucharist, and there’s a Eucharistic adoration chapel set up right here for our conference. Would you be willing to go in front of Jesus in the Eucharist and prayerfully ask him what he thinks of your relativistic views?” He agreed, cordially said goodnight and walked into the chapel to pray.

The next day, the young man tracked me down: “Dr. Sri! Dr. Sri! ... I’m so glad I caught you before you left. I wanted to tell you something.” He caught his breath and slowed down his speech. “I realized last night that I’m not really a relativist. The only reason I’ve been trying to be one is that ...” He paused and looked down at the ground before continuing. “The only reason I’ve been trying to be a relativist is that I wanted to be able to say premarital sex is okay.” Then he raised his head, looked me directly in the eye and said, “I wanted to be able to say premarital sex is okay for me.”

What an honest, humble young man! I was so impressed by how he admitted to what was lurking behind his relativistic positions. He had been trying to justify his own sexual behavior, and moral relativism was a convenient way to do so. By denying that there was an actual ethical standard everyone had to follow, he was trying to ease his conscience and excuse himself for having premarital sex.

Fortunately, this young man had the humility to recognize this and went on to express his desire to live a more chaste life. But not everyone has this humility. That’s why we need to keep in mind a sixth key to engaging moral relativism: Remember that relativism may be a mask covering up one’s own immoral behavior. You may hear your

friend talking about being nonjudgmental, being “pro-choice” or being open-minded to anyone’s definition of marriage. But the real issue driving his relativism might be something in his own moral life with which he’s not comfortable. It could be something from his past or something going on right now. It could be what he did to his girlfriend in high school or how he’s treating his wife right now. It could be disregard for his parents, marital infidelity, contraception or addiction to pornography.

When people are quick to say, “You should be tolerant of other people’s lifestyles. You shouldn’t tell other people what’s right and wrong,” realize they might really be talking about themselves: “Be tolerant of my little sin. Don’t tell me what’s right and wrong.” This recalls what Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger once taught about “the dictatorship of relativism.” “Today,” he said, “we are building a dictatorship of relativism ... whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.” According to the future Pope Benedict XVI, the primary dictator in the relativistic outlook is one’s own selfish desires. As such, relativism often serves as a mask to cover up one’s selfishness or rationalize a particular sin. That’s why merely arguing with those with this mindset usually doesn’t work. Pray for them. Make sacrifices for them. Offer your Communion for them. Remember: It’s not just an intellectual battle, but also a spiritual one.

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This series is based on his newest book, [Who Am I to Judge? Responding to Relativism with Logic and Love](#) (2017, Ignatius Press).

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