

The Uniqueness of Christ in an Age of Relativism

By Dick Keyes
Director of L'Abri Fellowship,
Southborough, Mass.

Dick Keyes served as the speaker for the Spring 2003 Harrington Counseling Lectures at Covenant Seminary. He is the author of Beyond Identity, True Heroism, Chameleon Christianity, and is finishing a book on cynicism. The following article is taken from a talk on the uniqueness of Christ that he gave during his time at Covenant.

One of the most contentious and difficult issues any Christian has to face today is the question of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. This issue is difficult, in part, because our society is religiously pluralistic.

We live in a society where kind, intelligent, sincere people all around us have very, very different religious convictions from Christian ones. What would ever lead a person to believe that there is one true God and only one way to Him in a time of such plurality? Or as it was asked to me once, what is your excuse for believing such a thing?

The intellectual and spiritual atmosphere in which we live quickly answers that question by saying that Christians who do believe in Christ's uniqueness believe it only because they are arrogant, ignorant, ethnocentric, and perhaps neurotic. If a Christian tries to convert somebody, then he or she is seen as bigoted, intolerant, imperialistic, and perhaps psychologically unbalanced.

Christians do not want to be arrogant, ignorant, ethnocentric, or neurotic, nor do we even want to be thought of in that way by other people. At the same time, the uniqueness of Christ as the Son of God, as the way, the truth, and the life, the only way to the Father, is not just something Christians can brush off or leave aside as if it were optional or on the periphery of the faith.

As we relate to others in the midst of these challenging assumptions we must see the place from which some of the assumptions stem. The conviction of Christ's uniqueness did not arise or thrive first in the nineteenth century colonial era of Western imperialism. In fact, it did not even arise in Europe. The whole Christian faith is a Middle Eastern religion, not a European religion at all.

In addition, religious pluralism is nothing new. The start of the Christian faith was in the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire in the first century was possibly more pluralistic than modern America. It was more radically diverse in the different religious movements. The Christian faith, with its claims to Christ's uniqueness, grew and thrived exactly in that pluralistic setting. Pluralism in the modern world may surprise the church today, but it offers no new challenge to the Christian faith.

Ironically, there is a special relevance of the New Testament for us now in dealing with pluralism. Far from putting us in a new paradigm, pluralism puts us back into the first century, right into the setting of the book

of Acts. Pluralism was exactly what the Apostle Paul was facing as soon as he stepped out the front door of a synagogue onto the main street of any gentile city.

Pluralism and Relativism

While pluralism is not new, we need to see that our society has developed a way for viewing pluralism that is widely accepted. That way of viewing is a philosophical system called relativism. Relativism is one possible paradigm for understanding pluralism. It is a system that denies that anyone can know absolute truth about God or about ultimate things and asserts that it is naïve for a person to think he or she has knowledge about such truth. Relativism declares that we are finite; we have no standard or criterion to judge competing truth claims, no scale with which to measure or examine differing beliefs.

When considering relativism, I often think of the example of a lifeguard on a beach who has an elevated chair so he can look down over everybody and see what is going on. He has a perspective that nobody else on the beach has. Everybody else has his or her feet in the sand, cannot see beyond immediate neighbors. But the lifeguard has an elevated chair from which to see the whole beach. Relativism tells us that nobody has that elevated view when it comes to religion. Everybody is at ground level, with only his or her local perspective.

Relativism claims that we have a lot of people from different perspectives saying what they think ultimate truth is, but that these people are simply expressing their own beliefs. They are attempting to name what is not namable. Relativism claims that it does not make sense to talk about some religions being true and other religions being false; doing so brings the wrong categories to the discussion. To the relativist no religions are true or false. Certainly none are true in any way that would exclude any others being true. They are all true in that they do more or less the same job; they express the deepest human longings and are means for achieving social cohesion; they help hold societies together and give them a sense of unity and common purpose.

Just as you would never say that vanilla ice cream is the only true ice cream and chocolate ice cream is false ice cream because you prefer vanilla, so also the relativist says you should never speak in such a way about your religious preferences. The issues of true and false have no place in the discussion.

How does relativism relate to pluralism? Simply put, relativism disrespects pluralism. Relativism seems to have high moral ground. It seems to celebrate the plurality of religious beliefs and be tolerant, non-judgmental, generous, and enlightened. It seems to celebrate the diversity of religious perspectives, but in fact the message of relativism is that it is the one exclusive and correct way to understand the full picture of religious diversity in the world. In fact, relativism is extremely absolutist! It assumes for itself the very status that it scorns when anybody else holds it.

This Way Up The Mountain

The relativist is a closet absolutist. You may have heard the idea that all religions are ways, or paths, up the same mountain. As these paths travel up the mountain the climber has no clue that there are actually other roads up the same mountain. When he finally gets to the top of the mountain and sees God, the person realizes that he was not on the only road at all but that there are lots of people on their way to God by all sorts of paths or religions.

This mountain analogy sounds very humble and makes any people who disagree with it feel ignorant, small-minded, and arrogant if they think that their road is the only road. But the real question to ask is – where is the person standing who is describing this mountain? He or she must be in an airplane in order to see the whole mountain. Why is the relativist the only one who gets to have an airplane when all others sweat and trudge up their roads in ignorance?

The relativist is not just giving us a lovely picture of openness. The relativist is giving one exclusive model to understand all the religions of the world. Relativism is an over-religion or a meta-religion that forces all religions into its mold. It sounds humble and willing to admit the fallibility of human knowing, but it produces a single vision of ultimate truth that excludes all other contenders. The relativist claims an immaculate perception of religious truth, but at the same time denies that anyone can have such a perspective.

Relativism denies pluralism, the idea that there are different options that differ substantially from each other. Relativism actually destroys pluralism. It homogenizes all differences so they are seen as basically the same. In the relativist's own illustration, pluralism is represented by these poor people struggling up the road on the mountain, all of them in the same ignorance about what they are doing.

Think of what this means for specific religions. For instance, the Christian faith affirms a belief in a personal God. Buddhism denies a personal God. Relativism says that these two religions are really the same in their most basic convictions. This is a homogenizing process that obscures the real differences.

So, for the relativist all views are one view. All religions are paths to salvation. But here we must ask, what does salvation mean? The different religions have very different views of salvation. Which salvation gets to be the one that we are talking about? For Buddhism salvation is nirvana. The Buddhist finally leaves behind all his desires and even his experience of his individuality. Compare this to the Muslim view of salvation. At least for the hijackers of recent fame, it meant that they would be met by seventy-two dark-eyed virgins who would be committed to indulging their every desire.

Whose salvation are we talking about? Whose heaven? If you take the relativist line, you have got to acknowledge that we really cannot say anything about the nature of salvation because the moment a person does, that person has excluded somebody else's view. So the only thing to say is that we know nothing. But that does not get anyone very far. So salvation generically is defined as “enabling a truly moral life” or “keeping the forces of despair at bay.” The intriguing thing is that those statements do not sound like they are coming out of any of the world religions but more like modern western liberal humanism forced onto the plurality of world religions.

In Defense of Pluralism

Christians need to be the ones defending pluralism against relativism. We need to defend the point that there is a difference among the religious options, and maintain that these differences are important.

Why are words like ‘conversion’ or ‘proselytize’ or ‘missionary’ so offensive today? It is not just because the people involved are belligerent and insensitive, because not all of them are. It is because the idea of conversion or proselytizing is offensive to the doctrines of relativism. If somebody converts, he or she is saying the options are not all the same – otherwise why would I change? You do not convert unless you believe there are real differences between the options available. The existence of any convert is testimony to the fact that those differences matter, and some conversions are enormously costly.

Why not change if you no longer believe your earlier convictions to be true? If they are important enough, why not even persuade somebody else to change, if you care about them? Isn't this true of every other area of knowledge? In history, economics, political science, medicine, physics – there are important differences. The health of those academic disciplines depends on free discussion about the differences in those fields. Because there is a plurality of views, people change their minds about affirmative action, tax cuts, global warming, counter-terrorist measures, and origins of the American Revolution. People change their views about all sorts of things and a good educational environment, and a free society, demands that conversions be possible.

Why is conversion such a problem only when it comes to religious truth in our society? If there is real plurality, a real difference of religious options, then it is possible to be wrong and to be wrong in a way that matters a great deal. If there really are differences, it is possible to be so wrong that it can be catastrophic. We could, for example, be accountable to some far greater Being than ourselves. We could be entirely wrong as to how to approach that greater Being. We could miss out on whole realms of meaning in our life here on earth.

If there are real choices between religious options it raises some very uncomfortable questions. By contrast, relativism, which does not respect the plurality of religions, is very comforting. It tells us that it is impossible to be wrong in any way that matters. It is perfectly safe to be entirely wrong about God, or to totally ignore God and questions of God's existence and relevance. Different views are differences only in preference – vanilla, chocolate, coffee, whatever. This way of looking at things encourages people to sleepwalk through the biggest choices of their lives.

It is relativism that is the opiate of the masses – especially in the modern university setting, where it deadens and discourages what could be enormously stimulating intellectual and spiritual discussion. Discussions of serious differences, however, too often are seen as dangerous and liable to offend somebody. Discussion of difference is put under the carpet as quickly as possible. But if we respect the plurality of religions, we are saying the choice between them is possible and necessary. God? No God? Which god? These are important questions that everybody ought to grapple with. We need an atmosphere that facilitates asking these questions and does not bury them in shame and fear of political incorrectness.

Any person is free to believe something that excludes my beliefs. Relativists do this all of the time. But it is important that they admit that they are excluding my beliefs. And then we can talk – one absolutist to another. We can be civil to each other, we can care for each other, we can love each other, we can have wonderful discussions together. Even if we end agreeing to disagree, I find that we will always learn from each other.

Welcoming the Open Discussion

If everyone would admit to being an absolutist – and everyone with any conviction about God has to exclude somebody else’s view of God – there could be much more fruitful discussion. We all hold some absolutes. Join the club. We are all fundamentalists; it is just a question of what things are fundamental to us. If we could agree this far, then the discussion about Jesus as the way to God could be a discussion held on a level playing field. My hope is for an atmosphere in which the reality of pluralism can be put on the table, in which there can be a civil interaction of different positions and their enormous implications. This calls for courage to let questions be aired and discussed openly. We must welcome the open discussion.

In that discussion, Christians must be ready to give an answer for their hope with gentleness and respect. Nothing so quickly discredits the Christian claim than if that claim is made in arrogance, defensiveness or the desire to just win an argument. May we look to Jesus himself as the one to give us the humility and the loyalty to truth which we need to represent him to our contemporaries.

This article originally appeared in Covenant magazine, the quarterly magazine of Covenant Theological Seminary. Reprint permission is available upon request by e-mailing covenant@covenantseminary.edu. Begin a free subscription to Covenant magazine at www.covenantseminary.edu/contactus/subscription.asp.

© 2003 Covenant Theological Seminary.



Rooted in Grace for a Lifetime of Ministry

12330 Conway Road, St. Louis, Mo., 63141 314-434-4044 www.covenantseminary.edu
National Seminary of the Presbyterian Church in America