

## **Relativism & the Moral Law**

Let us begin with prayer.

*Lord, we thank You for the great privilege we have of knowing You, Creator of the ends of the earth, our Redeemer, and Lord of the nations. We pray that we may be faithful in our generation to spread Your Gospel to the whole world and to hold up Your standards of righteousness, which are for our own good and for Your glory. We pray that You will be with us in this class to give us insight and wisdom and appreciation for diversity in cultures but above all, a love for Your Law. These things we ask for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

I wanted to add an excursus on cultural relativism and the moral law. We keep bumping into this issue so I thought I would try to sort through some things that have to do with this. Talking about God's Law that is universal, there is only one moral law as there is one lawgiver and judge. He has given one moral law for the whole earth. So we are assuming the universality of the moral law that stems from God as Creator of all and Ruler of all and Judge of all. It is what C. S. Lewis calls the Tao. That is the shorthand expression for the moral law as it has come to expression in various cultures at various times. There has been a tendency, particularly in the last generation, to undermine the idea of there being a universal moral law because of the observations that come from cultural relativism. There are two parts to this. The first part is the fact of cultural diversity. We have constantly pressed upon us that moral practices vary from culture to culture. That is an empirical fact and we recognize it. But from this empirical observation, a normative judgment is thought to follow. When you look at the world globally, diverse moral practices show that there is no universal standard of morality—that morality belongs to particular cultures. And from the obvious fact that there are diverse cultural practices, there is the inference that there is no universal standard of morality. Although this insight is often associated with the Modern Age, the work of cultural anthropologists, particularly Margaret Mead has been associated with cultural relativism. This point was made in the Ancient World. The ancient ethicists were aware of this. There is a passage in *Herodotus* that gets cited from time to time. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century before Christ, said that Darius, after he had gotten the kingdom, called into his presence certain Greeks who were at hand and asked what he should pay them to eat the bodies of their fathers when they die, to which they answer there is no sum that could tempt them to do such a thing. He then sent for certain Indians, men who eat their fathers, and asked them, while the Greeks stood by, what he should give them to burn the bodies of their fathers at their decease. The Indians cried aloud and bade him forebear such language. And so Herodotus concludes, "Pendar was right in my judgment when he said, 'Custom is the king over all.'" What is shocking to one group of people is the practices of another group, but then vice versa in this area of how to handle the dead.

Our response should be that we should distinguish cultural relativism from moral relativism, and I have three points that I think may be made. The first point is to observe the logical fallacy: the fact of diversity does not entail that no standard exists. The fact of diversity does not prove that no standard exists. Some culture may know the standard and others not. Diversity does not prove that no standard exists but only that it may require critical reflection to discover the standard. There is a logical fallacy involved in moving from the fact of diversity to adopting a norm of principle that therefore there is no universal standard. You get this quite frequently in our culture. Moral relativism is thought to be a logical inference from a diversity of practice. When Jocelyn Elders was Surgeon General in America, she was asked at one point whether it is wrong to have children out of wedlock. Her response was, "No, because everyone has different moral standards." Well, the fact that persons have different moral standards does not mean that one of those standards is not correct. It means we have to sort through the

standards to see whether (in the interest of children) having them out of wedlock is the right thing or the wrong thing to do. However, you hear that quite commonly. From the fact that people have different moral standards, no critique can be made. One of the best answers to that question is that we do not live that way. We do find things that we critique of others. It would have been quite illuminating had there been a follow-up question whether the Surgeon General thought polygamy was wrong. It is practiced in some cultures. Is the answer no because people have different standards? Is a cross-cultural universal standard something that we may pursue? I think that is the first thing to observe. There is a logical fallacy when you move from a description to a normative principle. It does not necessarily follow.

My second response is that there may be unity in the diversity so that different customs may be culturally conditioned applications of a common principle. In other words, you are dealing with something in common although the practice differs in a particular culture. In Herodotus' example, the issue is how to respect the dead. Although there is diversity in practice, there is at least unity in principle. Theoretically, it would be possible to ask the question, "Which is the more appropriate response to the dead?" As far as I know, whereas cremation has persisted as a respectful means of dealing with the dead, cannibalism has not. It may be practiced in some remote, isolated cultures, but I think there is the possibility of correction in really following through what the principle is.

My third point would be—as C. S. Lewis' illustrations of the Tao indicate, which is the appendix to *The Abolition of Man*—plainly, similarities do exist across cultures. We are told that every culture has taboos against incest and against wanton killing, at least within one's "in" group. There is some sacredness to human life. Anthropologists have documented such universal elements. C. S. Lewis had documented the principles that were embodied in those. I would say even where particular practices and rules vary, we should notice that there are areas related to human beings living in this world—areas of responsibility that overlap. Life and health, marriage and family—these are not just arbitrary in terms of culture. They are applying some universal principle.

Then my fourth point is that some practices may be relative to culture and others not. For example, the head covering in apostolic times is a conventional way of showing public propriety in gender relations. But in other cultures, there are other ways of showing propriety in gender relations. So, it is artificial to introduce into a culture where that has no significance simply for the sake of following what was a convention in apostolic times. How to show respect for the dead may be in some respects conventional. Christians sometimes debate over whether cremation or burial is appropriate given the doctrine of the resurrection. How to show respect for the dead may be in some respects conventional but not to the point of requiring a widow to leap upon her husband's funeral pyre in an act of self-emulation, the practice of suttee. The British, when they ruled India, simply made suttee against the law, against the long-standing cultural practice. We should distinguish between cultural practices that are applications of the principle and the principle itself in which the practices may be corrected. Practices can be corrected provided you do not adopt the theory of cultural dependency. I got this thought and the expression of this thought from Arthur Holmes', a long-time professor at Wheaton College, book on ethics. He cites an anthropologist named William Sumner. I have not read Sumner, but he writes, "Relativists like the anthropologist William Sumner hold that morality is not a matter of independent rational judgment but is causally dependent upon cultural context." Therefore, the particular morality of a people cannot be other than it is. Truth or falsity of their moral beliefs does not really arise. This means that if you are raised in a culture where cows are sacred, you do not question the truth or falsity of that. You just adopt it—it is culturally unquestionable.

Our response should be again to make a distinction between cultural relativism and moral relativism. The former does not entail the latter. Here I think we should distinguish between cultural transmission of

moral principle and cultural determinism. We are dependent on our culture, at least initially, for a lot of things—more than we realize in terms of practices that we adopt. But it does not follow from that that moral values are by definition culturally determined so that we never question the truth or falsity of what we imbibe from our culture. I have two points by way of elaboration on that response.

The first response is that historically, as a matter of fact, there have been internal critiques that arise within a culture. So I think that the idea of cultural dependency to the point of cultural determinism is historically falsifiable. To me, the best example is the Hippocratic Oath from around 400 BC.

Hippocrates required his medical students, before he would allow them to study with them, to take an oath. Among the things that he required in that oath is that they would not use their medical knowledge to produce an abortion or to allow euthanasia, even at the person's request. So, two of the issues that are being hotly debated in our culture now, Hippocrates wrote into his oath in 400 BC. The Hippocratic movement in medicine was a minority movement. When you read the Hippocratic Oath, it calls on all the gods of Greece—all the pagan gods by Apollo and all the others. So, it is not directly influenced by biblical principles at that point. But it was a revolutionary movement that rose within Greek culture. With the coming of Christianity, Christian medical practices removed all the pagan gods and required the oath be taken in the name of the Lord, the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Then it became the standard from the West. But it arose within Greek culture. We cannot document where Hippocrates got the idea of doing that. It is possible that biblical revelation had some to do with it. I do not think that we can exclude that. But in any case, it shows that there are prophetic voices that arise within a culture that critique the standard cultural teaching. It also shows that although we are initially dependent upon our culture, we are not dependent upon it to the point of not ever having an internal critique. We should not minimize the power of cultural formation.

Gertrude Himmelfarb had a book published in 1995 called *The Demoralization of Society*. In it she makes certain observations about the values imparted by the reigning culture, particularly in sanctity of life issues. She writes, "It takes a great effort of will and intellect for the individual to decide that something is immoral and act on that belief when the law declares it legal and the culture deems it acceptable." You can do it. It is not culturally determined, but it is not an easy thing to do to resist the culture to that extent. And so, she goes on to say, "This is searching. It is not only our political and cultural leaders who are prone to this failure of moral nerve. Everyone has been infected by it to one degree or another." We should not think that we have escaped dependency upon our culture. We need to always be engaged in the process of critical examination in ourselves because the moral forming power of our culture is a significant thing.

The second point that I would make is that we recognize that across cultures there are exceptions to diversity and you can rightly ask, "Are these (the exceptions that you have in the Tao as Lewis represents them) due to accidental similarities or to universal characteristics of human beings and their societies?" C. S. Lewis' point is that these values are objective. The kinds of things that are represented in the principle of the Tao are true to the kind of beings we are. Well, if they are true to the kinds of beings that we are, then cross-cultural critiques are also possible. We are talking about the possibility of universal moral principles because of a universal commonality of humanity. Our responsibility, I think, is to show that beliefs may very well change with more adequate information and moral instruction. Cultures are not monolithic. It becomes clearer in the information age that cultures are very fluid. What are the boundaries of a culture? You can no longer speak of a monolithic culture except in very remote areas where you have isolated groups of people. So we do exchange moral views and should not fail to enter into engagement with others and expose ourselves to that kind of moral engagement.

I mentioned earlier in the course that the issue of infanticide was one of these accepted issues in culture that through the witness of Christians became unacceptable. The appeal was to think through the principle of which it is held to be wrong to take a human life. They would ask what infants are and whether it is right to expose them to that kind of thing. So, cross-cultural critiques are possible. I think that a contemporary example that gets some press is the parallel right of females as a right of passage to males in circumcision. It is called female circumcision, but actually this operation is very different from male circumcision. It is the removal of the clitoris, and so it is described now as genital mutilation. That has a pejorative aspect to it, but now some cultures do practice it. Well, I think that it is a culturally accepted practice. Young girls want that operation in order to identify with their culture. They can be questioned cross culturally on the basis of whether or not that does, as a matter of fact, cohere with human dignity and sexual function as God has created us to be. That is an issue that particularly some moral relativists find as a sticking point. It goes down very hard when you are talking about moral relativism to come to this issue in which women are being subordinated to the sexual desires of men so that a man's wife is only for him and sexual pleasure is not a female ideal. That is a very different thing. Is this ethnocentric? That is typically the idea that you get in many of these arguments—that it is arrogant and intolerant to critique another culture. But I think that that depends on how it is argued. I think that sometimes Westerners have been arrogant in the way they have critiqued other cultures. I think that the answer is to recognize that we are all subordinate to the same moral law, recognize that we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and open ourselves to criticism of our culture from outside. That is a necessary function of cross-cultural engagement. Humility requires being open to criticism. But it is obvious we cannot leave people to whatever practices they deem acceptable within their culture. The thing most in the news now is ethnic cleansing. Everybody regards ethnic cleansing as not just a culturally-conditioned practice, but it is appealed to a universal moral law to which the nations commit themselves.

I think that we can apply this in the issue of non-marital sex. How do we persuade people who accept non-marital sex according to a different standard? I think that it is in the sexual area where people mainly press relativism of the standards. I think that that is a self-serving faith. You get more agreement on human life although it has its problems now with modern technology, as we will see later on. But the most relativistic area is in terms of sexual relations where people resist being told that there is a right and a wrong. Lewis Smedes approached this issue at one point by distinguishing between an ethics of caution. We are talking about non-marital sexual intercourse, non-marital sexual relations. He said, "One way to approach it is the ethics of caution, which asks, 'Will I get hurt?'" Well, that is not a wrong question to ask. You can get hurt. You can get hurt emotionally, particularly if you are young. But there is always an emotional element involved in this most intimate of human relationships. You can also get hurt physically with the spread of venereal disease. Now, because of the dreaded, fatal disease of Aids, an ethic of caution, which leads you to a monogamous, faithful relationship, is a significant principle to bear in mind and to advocate cross-culturally. There is then the ethics of concern. Ethics of concern asks, "Will I hurt somebody else?" That also is a legitimate question to ask. This ethics of caution is more egoistic, but we have seen that self-referencing duties are not to be excluded. There is a point to them. We have a moral responsibility to take care of ourselves. Ethics of concern is concern lest I hurt somebody else, and you can hurt somebody else. There are very destructive behaviors in terms of the risks that are taken emotionally. With respect to a female partner, there is a risk of pregnancy and all that goes with that. Both of these point us to a committed relationship as being the ideal place for sexual activity.

The third area that he specifies is an ethics of command. This goes beyond the ethics of caution and the ethics of concern. These are, when examined, consequentialist in nature. Consequentialism is a part of our ethical reasoning. Some things are wrong because of their bad effects so you could argue that these

are contingently wrong. But the question of whether it is right should be asked. And you are talking there about something intrinsic in nature, whether it is right in terms of what sexuality is for the human person and whether this intimate human relationship, which has the potential of bringing children into the world, is right outside of a permanent monogamous relationship. I think that although we have a strong biblical argument for that, it is possible to construct that in non-religious terms. If we do, it is probably better to use the language of character in order to get a hearing. We must understand, however, that a mark of character is doing the right thing, which includes respect for others, respect for oneself, and respect for the relationship. You can make a case for that, pursuing that line of fault, which we will do in more detail when we come to the seventh commandment. Although people have different moral standards, they ought not to have different standards. Is bringing children into the world outside of marriage wrong? Well, if you look at the effects of bringing children into the world outside of a committed heterosexual relationship, outside of marriage, we do not need to wait to be able to prove empirically the destructive effects of non-marital sex. We know in advance, in terms of the way in which God has created us as human beings, that there is an inappropriate sexual intercourse because it is outside of that committed relationship. It comes down to whether sexuality is simply a function of physical organs for pleasure or whether there is something especially life-enhancing about it in a whole-person union. Natural law reasoning, which is what I am adopting here, concludes that adultery and fornication are wrong because it takes from the human sex act its unitive as well as its procreative aspect. God has set this up so that two human beings are joined, in terms of that relationship, with the potential of bringing children into the world. I think that that case has to be made, but it is a cross-cultural standard, even with American society because we now have many subcultures that disagree on sexual morality. This is something to be taught in the public school as we approach it in terms of an ethic of character. There have been movements now to have abstinence-based sex education in the public school. Some of them have been very successful in looking at it in terms of all these perspectives but including an intrinsic understanding of sexuality in relationship to human beings. The reason why marriage has had such a commitment up until our generation with the sexual revolution is because there is something in human nature that that is the most fulfilling aspect of human nature. It has been eroded since the latter part of the 20th century, but look at the devastation that it has brought in its wake.

There is a lot more that needs to be added to that, but I think you get a perspective. We should not buy into moral relativism from the fact of cultural diversity. We should recognize cultural diversity and appreciate it. We should not be swayed by the theory of cultural dependency because it is falsifiable both within cultures and cross-culturally. We do accept cross-cultural critique. It is not ethnocentric when one culture critiques another. We should mutually subordinate ourselves to finding the truth of the objective moral law.

This is not an argument for theism. This is an argument for the recognition of objective moral values. C. S. Lewis makes the case on that basis that objective moral values are there. So the first thing to do in our situation is not to get to the source of the moral law, but to get to the fact of objective values. I think that C. S. Lewis provides us a good model for getting at the issue. It must first be established that we are being held to a universal moral law on such issues as apartheid, and now ethnic cleansing. Then we can ask, "Where does the universal principle come from? Is evolution an adequate basis by which that can be determined?" Apologetics is not my strong point, but that would be the next question to ask. The first thing is to establish that moral distinctions are there and that people, in spite of themselves, recognize them. In spite of the postmodern observation that we all are encumbered selves, we come with things that are our own perspective. Even postmodernism is self-defeating if it is thought to be deterministic because that would mean the postmodern theory itself is deterministic and so you argue in a circle. But I think that the fact of the matter is that we do not live that way either as individuals or as humanity. We make these judgments about certain actions that are not just inappropriate but they are wrong. They are

immoral. What is the source of that kind of language? What is the source of that judgment? I would say in advance that if human beings are created in the image of God, no answer is going to satisfactorily give an account except that it is God who has made us in this way. I think you can appeal to general revelation, which is what I am suggesting we do here.

General revelation has the status of a command that is embodied in the way human beings are so that this is true to the way human beings are. There is wide recognition, if not perfect recognition, of that and then differences of how it is worked out in practice. I think that it is a further step to ask if human beings are what the Bible says we are—created in the image of God. No account of the moral law, no account of the Tao, no account of the platitudes of morality (first principles of practical reason) will be adequate without tracing it back to the Creator. So the Francis Schaeffer method is to go through the inadequacies of the various alternatives that are presented to show their inadequacy in order to create a vacuum in which the idea of God as the Creator fulfills that. That is a complex process, but I think that is still the viable method. We begin with the assumption, presupposition if you will, that human beings are created in the image of God. The source of moral knowledge is the Creator and therefore no account of morality will be adequate unless it takes that into account. Then comes the laborious job of analyzing positions as they arise and presenting the positive side of how, on Christian assumptions or presuppositions, things that are inexplicable on an evolutionary basis fall into place.

Since we have a little time here, I want to read you just one brief section from the book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*.

On July 31st, 1941, less than a year after the salute to the flag had been ordered by Vichy Pastor Trocme received a written order from the mayor of Le Chambon instructing him to ring at full tilt the bell of the temple for a quarter of an hour beginning at high noon August the 1st. On that day, France would be celebrating the anniversary of Petain's founding of the French Legion of Veterans for bringing about the national resolution. He was told that by ringing the bell he was showing his gratitude to the marshal for having brought discipline and pride into the soul of France by establishing that legion. All members of the Legion had taken an oath of allegiance to the marshal himself and not to any laws coming from the people or approve them. They were a militant force. The cutting edge of the national revolutionist's task was to set an example of patriotic enmity against Jews, Communists, and Free Masons. [...] As soon as he received the order to ring the bell, Trocme went to the custodian of the temple and asked her not to do so. The next day, there was silence at noon around the temple. The little Catholic church of Le Chambon rang its bell expressing its ancient solidarity with the national government of France. Trocme might never have heard what had happened at the temple if he had not met the custodian by accident the day after the anniversary in the big rambling square of Le Chambon. Now, the custodian was named Emily, and she was a Darbyist. She was a Plymouth Brethren, and she had the job of being the custodian of the Reformed church. When, on August the 2nd, Trocme stood in the square like a tree over tiny, sturdy Emily, two allies were facing each other. Emily did not begin the conversation. She and her fellow Darbyists were not given to chatter. "Well, Emily," the pastor asked, "everything went off well yesterday? No incidents?" "Everything went off well, Mr. Trocme. There is nothing wrong." Darbyist silence. Then Trocme insisted, "Come now, Emily, you were not visited by anyone?" "Oh, but yes," replied the piping voice with an accent that ended every syllable with a vowel. "There were two ladies from up there," and a tiny, thick arm swept up toward the northern hills of Le Chambon. "You know those proper ladies who speak French." Silence. Emily was referring to the people who had come to Le Chambon for the summer from the great cities and lived upon the hills in the handsome villas. Their cosmetics and their classic French were all that interested Emily about them. "Well, then?" asked

Trocme, adopting with reluctance the slow pace of Emily's speech. "Well, they came to look for me and they said, 'You are not ringing the bell, Emily. It is a national holiday today.' 'The pastor gave me orders, I told them.'" "Oh, well, we would really be surprised if your pastor had allowed it to be rung. Come, Emily, hurry. It is noon and it is an order from the marshal." Part of Emily's meager repertoire of expressions was a little crooked smile on one side of her mouth. This smile appeared suddenly as she looked up at the pastor. It was almost mischievous, youthful smile, protestors who are in complete command of their situation. "And what did you say?" "I told them that the bell does not belong to the marshal but to God. It is rung for God otherwise it is not rung. Otherwise, no!" "Bravo, and then what happened?" "Oh, well, they ordered me to open the big front door, and they told me that they would ring the bell themselves, but I did not want to do that. Then I defended my temple." There in the wide square of Le Chambon, Emily placed herself before Trocme as she had placed herself before the painted ladies—firmly planted on her feet, her thick arms outspread like the arms of a cross, shivering slightly with enthusiasm and with remembered power defending her temple, which was of course not her temple at all since the Darbyists worshipped in total independence from the Huguenots. "And how did it all end, Emily?" Again that smile, but her eyes were round. "Oh, you remember, Monsieur Trocme. Yesterday at noon it was raining spears hard. I was under the lintel of the big door; the painted ladies were out in the courtyard. Soon, they were dripping wet and they left."

Well, those ordinary acts of firmness in the right are part of the story. There are many examples of that in the book. They are heroes, and Emily is certainly one of them.