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EVANGELICAL DICTIONARY *of* CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Edited by

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**Associate Editors: Warren S. Benson,
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Relativism, Religion, and Christian Education. Relativism is a philosophic position which denies that there is any absolute reference point or that there is any possibility of knowing anything as it is. Relativism affirms that one's knowledge and value judgments, that is, what one perceives as true or false, right or wrong, good or bad, are subject to one's perception and situation. Because perceptions and situations differ from place to place, time to time, person to person, and culture to culture, relativism concludes that no universal judgments can be made. While relativism may be related to pluralism, it should not be confused with it. Pluralism is a social reality and a political position, acknowledging differences, particularly racial, cultural, and religious differences, and affirming the right of most differences to exist.

A relativistic viewpoint (sometimes identified with skepticism) has a long history in philosophy. However, it had been a minor voice until the modern era when David Hume (1711–76) developed the notion that the only way we can know is through perceptions based on sensory input. Later, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) attempted to protect science from relativism by postulating that the human mind had innate categories for sense perception, but he denied that ability to know anything nonmaterial, including God. It should be noted that Albert Einstein's (1870–1955) theory of relativity in physics has increased the popular sense that "all is relative," but in fact his theory includes the constant of the speed of light.

The relativist viewpoint now permeates secular societies. In a 1994 U.S. survey, George Barna found 72 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "There is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define truth in totally conflicting ways, but both could be correct." (Barna, 1994, 155–56). Allan Bloom observed that "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he [or she] believes, that truth is relative" (1987, 25). However, many people have little awareness of the groundings, inner contradiction, implications, or consequences of relativism and they often apply it selectively.

Relativism is worked out in many areas of thought. Metaphysical relativism denies any objective absolute, including the eternal God portrayed in the Bible. Epistemological relativism, starting with finite, conditioned, and individual humans, denies the ability to know absolute truth.

Cultural relativism goes beyond the obvious recognition that cultures differ in many ways from one another. Cultural relativism holds that cultures are constructed by people according to their own values and needs and are not to be evaluated by the norms of any other culture of (nonexistent) absolute. If a group believes certain behavior to be right, then the act is right for them and there can be no justification for morally judging it. Cultural relativists cannot condemn slavery previously practiced in the Southern states, child and adult sacrifices of ancient religions, the genocide of the Nazis, or the recent apartheid of South Africa.

Ethical or moral relativism is related to cultural relativism. The idea of absolute criteria for values is rejected; universally binding categorical imperatives (such as the Ten Commandments) are denied. Values are only relative to the person or situation (situational ethics) or culture in which a person functions. Some implications of this position include the impossibility of judging any culturally accepted practice as immoral, the illusion of the idea of moral progress, the arbitration of

morals by public opinion, and the importance of defining the boundaries of the culture.

Religious relativism is another variation of cultural relativism. Kant argued that the transcendent dimension in religion is unverifiable and that at best it is allowable as an individual and private experience. Since there is no external or ultimate reference point by which religions may be judged or compared, people are left to choose a religion if they wish based on what seems best for them.

Apologists for the Christian faith have correctly identified relativism as one of the major mindsets which must be addressed in order for modern and postmodern persons to be able to adopt the Christian faith and life. Christians realize that human knowledge is limited by our finiteness in terms of the faculties we have to receive information, our ability to process that information, the accessibility of the object of our knowledge, and our location, space and time. We acknowledge the "relative relativity" of many things, and accept that "we know only in part" (1 Cor. 13:9), but insist that we may know, as Francis Schaeffer (1972) said, "true truth" (18). We believe that at the heart of reality is the infinite, eternal, personal God who formed the universe, communicated moral laws to humankind, acts redemptively in history, and will be the arbiter of all creation.

Christian education must address not only the logic of relativism but also take into account its mood. Many people are attracted to relativism because it leads to tolerance of differing views. Relativistic thought also considers it inappropriate to make universal claims such as "Jesus is the way to God" or to try to persuade people to change their minds. Christian educators must show respect for all people, allowing them to state their views and listening empathetically to them, while lovingly challenging them with the message of the Bible. We can and must stress relevance and personal meaning without succumbing to the impoverishment of relativism.

PAUL BRAMER

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