

The New Absolutes

William Watkins' book The New Absolutes says that Americans are not relativists, we're actually absolutists. Rather than abandoning absolutes, we're adopting new ones in place of the old.

Reality in the Balance

When Christians take a stand on a given moral issue—on abortion, for instance—what are some typical responses? Someone might say, “What right do you have to push *your* morality on the rest of us?” Or, “Abortion might be wrong for you, but it's not for me.”

What these people are implying is that such beliefs are *relative*; that is, they are related to something else—an individual's desires or circumstances, for example. Because people change through time, however, something that is true or good for a person today might not be so tomorrow. Nothing is true or good for all people at all times.

Have you noticed, however, that many of the same people who claim that truth and morality are relative can be found denouncing certain political views, or actively pushing the social acceptance of a formerly rejected lifestyle, or fighting for new rights in one area or another?

Author William Watkins *has* noticed, and he's recorded his thoughts in a new book titled, *The New Absolutes*. Watkins believes that despite the rhetoric, Americans are in fact *not* relativists; we are in reality *absolutists*. He says that, rather than *abandoning* absolutes, we are simply adopting *new* ones to replace the *old*.

It is now believed, Watkins says, “that truth and error, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, normal and abnormal, and a host of other judgments are determined by the individual, . . .

circumstances, or . . . culture. . . . There is no transcendent God or universal natural law we can point to that can inform us about who we are, what our world is like, and how we should get along in it.”

What is the source of this thinking? Watkins points to three elements: a loss of belief in absolute truth, a strong belief in tolerance, and a detachment from people and institutions as a result of pessimism and distrust.

If Americans have concluded that ideas and morals are relative, however, why does Watkins say Americans are really absolutists? We are betrayed, he says, by our behavior.

Evidence that Watkins is right is seen in the glut of lawsuits in the courts, calls for law and order in politics, moral outrage over various offenses, cries for human rights, and the spreading of liberal democratic ideas to other countries. Americans have an idea of what is right, and we think others should agree with us. This is not relativism.

More significant, though, is how an absolutist mentality is seen in those who typically espouse relativism. For example, those who scream the loudest for *tolerance* often restrict others to saying and doing only what is politically correct. In the name of *pluralism* secularists push religion out of the public square. And *multiculturalists* condemn the West for its cultural practices. It seems that what is sauce for the goose is *not* sauce for the gander.

The average American who has come to accept relativistic notions of truth and morality might fairly be accused of being only inconsistent. But those who are real activists in the current fight for cultural change must bear the charge of blatant hypocrisy.

Old Absolutes vs. New Absolutes

In his book *The New Absolutes*, William Watkins contrasts ten traditional beliefs (old absolutes) with the ten beliefs that are replacing them (new absolutes). Though these new beliefs might not be “absolutes” in a strict, philosophical sense, they *function* as absolutes in contemporary society.

In this essay I'll look at three issues Watkins discusses—pro-life versus pro-death beliefs, religion in the public square, and political correctness and tolerance—to see if, indeed, the social activists mentioned earlier are really the relativists they claim to be. As we consider these topics, I think you'll come to agree with Watkins that the culture war is not being fought between absolutists and relativists, but between two groups of absolutists.

Death: What a Beautiful Choice

First, let's consider the pro-life versus pro-death question.

According to Watkins, the *old* absolute was: “Human life from conception to natural death is sacred and worthy of protection.” The *new* absolute is: “Human life, which begins and ends when certain individuals or groups decide it does, is valuable as long as it is wanted.”

Two issues which bring this new belief to the fore are *abortion* and *physician-assisted suicide*. Few practices are as fiercely opposed or defended as abortion. Opponents say abortion is morally wrong for all people. Proponents say it is a matter of individual choice. Physician-assisted suicide draws similar responses.

It is easy to overstate the thinking of those espousing the new absolute of the value of life. Probably very few would say that they “love death” or would think of death as a “good” thing ranking up there, say, with riches and great health and freedom. Rather, death is more often thought of simply as the

lesser of two evils.

Nevertheless, there *are* many who think of death as a positive thing, as something to be embraced, as the best answer to suffering or to certain hardships of life that many people experience.

Whether they think of death as a good thing or not, however, they think of it as a right not to be tampered with. It is rooted, they say, in a Constitutional “right to privacy.”

In claiming this right, however, any foundation in relativistic thinking must be abandoned. For the very “right” proponents claim is itself an *absolute*. They are saying that the right of individuals to decide for themselves should be observed by everyone else. When they say it is wrong for pro-lifers to try to press their beliefs on others, they are stating an absolute. If they say that the value of human life is a matter of its quality rather than of intrinsic worth, they are stating another absolute.

Some relativists will try to wriggle out of the charge of absolutism by saying that their position might be right for now but not necessarily for all times and all places. Nonetheless, their ideas about the value of human life and the option of death as a solution to human suffering function as absolutes in our society today.

Watkins is correct. The stubbornness of abortion advocates and assisted-suicide proponents in defending their “rights” is good evidence for the claim that Americans, despite all the talk, are not relativists after all.

Freedom From Religion

It used to be held that “religion is the backbone of American culture, providing the moral and spiritual light needed for public and private life.” Now, according to Watkins, we have a *new* absolute: “Religion is the bane of public life, so for the

public good it should be banned from the public square.”

Certainly there are those who are this adamant about the place of religion. These are the ones who raise a fuss when a prayer is uttered at a public school graduation ceremony or who complain when a nativity scene is set up on public property at Christmas.

Probably the majority of Americans are not this combative about the issue. However, for a variety of reasons many believe religion should be kept separate from public life .

One reason is a misunderstanding of the First Amendment. We have been told over and over again that the separation of church and state requires that the government must not be involved with religious matters in any way. The new absolute is this: religion and public policy should be kept separate.

We don't often notice, however, that strict “separationists” do not talk much about our nation's beginnings. A study of our founding documents shows that religion was an integral part of Americans' lives; references to the Bible and Christian beliefs are often cited in the construction of our new government. Amazingly enough, the writers of the Constitution did not see in it the “wall of separation” current interpreters do.

Another reason people think religion should be kept a private matter is a misunderstanding about religion itself. Having been “schooled” in relativistic thinking, many (perhaps most) Americans believe that whatever they believe is true *for them*, but not necessarily for other people.

But this cannot be so. Religions provide an explanation of what is ultimately *real*. Either there is one true God or there is not. Either there is salvation through Jesus, or there is enlightenment through meditation, or there is some other way to find fulfillment. Not all of these can be true *in reality*.

This issue gets really tangled up when we bring in the matter of rights. The idea that everyone has the right to worship as he or she chooses has been transformed to mean that each person's choice of religion is true. "I have the right to believe as I wish" becomes "My belief is as true as yours." The fact that I believe something makes it true.

But is that how things work in other areas of life? If I believe that I am a millionaire, does that make me one? With respect to religion, does believing there is a God put Him there? Or does believing there is no God produce a god-less universe?

The new absolutism with respect to religion is a very real concern for many Americans. As Christians we are taught that our beliefs have meaning for all of life, not just for the prayer closet, yet bringing such beliefs out into the public arena has brought some Christians great difficulty.

It is ironic that, in a nation which began with a strong desire for the free expression of religious beliefs, people are now being forced more and more to leave their beliefs at home.

Does this sound like relativism to you?

The Politically Correct Life

The hypocrisy of the new absolutism is seen more clearly than anywhere else in what is now called "political correctness" or PC for short.

To be politically correct is to be in line with certain ideals promoted by the new cultural reformers, ideals such as abortion rights, multiculturalism, gender feminism, and homosexual rights. To say or do anything which goes against these ideals is to be politically incorrect.

It is easier to understand PC if we think of it as the end of

a chain of thinking.

First is the acceptance of relativism, the idea that there are no absolutes. This belief, taken with our democratic idea of equality, results in the belief that everyone's beliefs and choices are equal or equally valid. There should be no discrimination against other beliefs or lifestyles. This is the *new tolerance*, the prime virtue of the new reformers.

When history is viewed from this perspective, it seems clear that history is the story of the strong taking advantage of the weak. The weak—or disadvantaged—are victims who now require extra help to attain their rightful place of equality. Merely belonging to a victimized group is enough to expect this extra help regardless of whether a given individual has been victimized. The advantaged must now be sensitive to the "needs" of the disadvantaged to avoid making them feel any more victimized and must work to protect their rights. Finally, the advantaged must not do or say anything which could be interpreted as differentiating the disadvantaged, of showing them as different in a negative way. Being sensitive to the plight of the "oppressed" and avoiding doing or saying anything which might make them feel marginalized or inadequate or looked down upon . . . this is *political correctness*.

It is certainly true that there have been and are people who oppress others. This must be opposed. The problem with political correctness, however, lies in over-correcting the wrong.

For example, in *The New Absolutes*, William Watkins lists some words some real estate agents learn to shun in an effort to avoid offending potential buyers. *Executive* has racist overtones since most executives are white. *Sports enthusiast* might make the disabled feel left out. *Master bedroom* creates images of slavery. *Walk-in closet* could offend people who can't walk.

Author Stan Gaede [pronounced Gay-dee], in his book *When Tolerance Is No Virtue*, says that “the overt goal of PC . . . is to enforce a uniform standard of tolerance, regardless of race, gender, cultural background or sexual orientation. The problem is that the items on this list . . . are not precisely parallel to each other. Though each is the basis for discrimination in our society, they involve very different kinds of issues. So the question immediately becomes: What does it mean to be tolerant *in each case*? . . . PC allows each group to define tolerance for itself.”

We have now come full circle. The relativism which purportedly undergirds the new tolerance gives way to exactly what it was trying to be rid of, namely, absolutes. That is, the reformers make their own ideals the new guidelines for society. We are all expected to abide by them. These are the new absolutes.

How should Christians respond to all this? Next, we’ll look at how the new absolutes are promoted, and we’ll think about how we might respond.

Absolutely For the Common Good

It’s a myth that America is a relativistic society. The truth is, Americans are a very moralistic people. What is alarming, however, is how cultural reformers are seeking to establish new absolutes which go against traditional ones. Watkins shows how these reformers are setting up new rules we all must follow.

How shall we understand the contradiction between claims of relativism on the one hand, and the imposition of new absolutes on the other? Watkins believes the claim to relativism is an attempt “to rationalize . . . misbehavior and disarm . . . critics.” For example, individuals might fall back on relativism to justify sexual activity once held to be deviant. However, the supposed relativist quickly becomes an absolutist when he wants *others* to agree with *him* on a given

idea or issue.

But if everything is relative, how are relativists able to convince others of the rightness of their own beliefs? They can't appeal to a foundation of unchanging realities and objective truths and be consistent with their relativism.

So how do they do it? Calling opponents names, "fundamentalist" is a popular term, or repeating simplistic clichés—"safe, legal abortion" for example—are a couple of their favorite means. The media play a strong role in this process, especially television. Captivating images, clever writing, strategically placed laugh tracks, and other elements persuasively convey ideas without logical reasoning.

It is crucial that we step back to see what this situation sets us up for. If we are conditioned to be persuaded by sloganeering rather than by rational discourse, we are prepared to be taken in by any smooth talker. All our clamor for rights and for the authority of the individual has the unexpected result of preparing us to lose our freedoms at the hands of charismatic tyrants.

What can we do to turn things around?

First, Watkins believes that reality itself is on our side. The new absolutes go against the way the universe is. Many women who opt for childlessness, for example, find themselves late in life confronting their own maternal instincts. We can point out these facts to those who believe we can do anything we want and get along quite nicely.

Second, we can learn to recognize sloganeering and insist that the cultural reformers use sound reason when promoting their ideals.

Third, we can point to the hypocrisy of so-called relativists. Homosexuals who barge in on church services demanding tolerance for their lifestyle must see how intolerant *they*

are. Those who demand freedom of thought and expression cannot reasonably exclude religious beliefs from public discourse.

As strange as it might sound at first, William Watkins calls us to a renewed *intolerance*. He says, "We must violate the new tolerance and become people marked by intolerance. Not an intolerance that unleashes hate upon people, but an intolerance that's unwilling to allow error to masquerade as truth. An intolerance that calls evil *evil* and good *good*."

To reestablish the old absolutes, Watkins calls for the acknowledgment of certain beliefs, such as: all life is precious; relativism is false; the moral law is real; and, religion is essential. A return to these basics will return us to sound public policy-making, to greater civil order, and to moral progress.

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